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BUFFALO BILL'S Volunteer Vigilantes;

Or, THE MYSTERIOUS MAN IN BLUE.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM.



BUFFALO BILL, NOW ON THE ALERT, GATHERED HIS LASSO, READY TO ACT IN THE STARTLING EMERGENCY.

Buffalo Bill's Volunteer Vigilantes;

OR,

THE MYSTERIOUS MAN IN BLUE.

A Story of Weird Adventure in
the Wild West.

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

CHAPTER I.

ON A SECRET MISSION.

"This is terrible! It is appalling, and the red deed calls to Heaven for vengeance!"

The one who uttered these startling words was a man of world-wide fame—no less a personage than Buffalo Bill—among men the born hero of the plains.

It was in the gray dusk of morning, and the scene was upon the limitless plains of the far frontier.

The time a score of years ago when the name of Buffalo Bill was known to the army and border settlements, to the miner and the ranchman as the champion of scouts, guides and Indian-fighters.

Two companions accompanied Buffalo Bill on that morning. He was acting as guide for them to a settlement whither he was going on an important mission.

The two were young men fresh from the civilization of the East—one a recent graduate of Yale, going to teach school in the border settlement, and by name Allan Tremain; the other, Dallas Donohue, a young physician, who accompanied his friend to begin the practice of medicine there in the new country among the farmer settlers, the miners and cattle-men.

They had left the stage on the Overland Trail, and were told that they must await some parties going through, as the trails were beset with dangers—Indians and road-agents being the ones to fear, not to speak of the fear of being lost in that then unbounded wilderness.

But just then a stranger had ridden into the little stage station, alone and on his way to the settlement which the young men sought.

He was a tall, splendidly-formed man, dressed in velvet coat, black trousers, slouch hat, but showing no weapons about his person.

He looked like a border sport, and his dark, strikingly handsome face was lighted up with most expressive eyes, while a mustache with curling ends but half concealed the determined, resolute mouth.

The keeper of the tavern had appeared to recognize him, but, ere the host could speak the name, he received a warning sign and heard the words:

"Landlord, I am going to the Silver Thread Settlement, and would like you to take care of me to night and put me on the right trail to-morrow."

The young men heard the name of the settlement they wished to find and listened attentively, their gaze riveted by the appearance of the striking stranger.

"You kin git lodgin's fer man and horse, pard, at my lay-out; but whar is ther rest of yer outfit?" asked the landlord.

"I am alone, pard."

"And goin' to ther Silver Thread Settlement?"

"That is my intention."

"I guess you be a stranger in these parts."

"Well, you might call me so."

"Yer don't look like a durned fool."

"I am not generally picked up as one."

"Waal, maybe yer hain't; but fer yer ter strike ther trail alone to Silver Thread, yer would be set down as a tenderfoot hopin' ter git some one ter kill him."

"Is it so bad as that?"

"And wuss."

"I was told I could not reach this station, that red-skins and road-agents were on the trail; but here I am, safe and hungry," said the stranger, smiling.

"What trail did you come?"

"Down the Dead River Valley."

"Whew! You war playin' in great luck, for the whole country is as full o' Injuns an' outlaws as a Bullfoundland pup is of fleas."

"Well, I simply passed, as we say in the game of poker, and here I am."

"Luck can't stick to one man clean through a trail, and says I to you, jist wait until a wagon train, or soldiers goes through, or you'll turn up yer toes."

"Why, here is two gents, tenderfoots from ther Land o' ther Risin' Sun, and greener than grass in May, awaitin' ter shove through to Silver Thread; but they has horse-sense enough ter wait here and find company."

"All right; I'm company; so if they wish to go through with me, let them say the word, for I start at daybreak."

"Now let me remind you, Pard Landlord, that I'm hungry."

"Follow my trail, pard," and, once out of the saloon, the landlord turned and grasped the hand of the stranger guest, and cried:

"But I is glad to see you, and I like to give it away who you was, though you hain't togged up as usual, and you has been scalpin' yer chin, I sees, and choppin' off yer long hair."

"I cut my imperial off, Pard Sankey, but my long hair is done up under my hat, for I'm on a secret trail and do not care to be known."

"But, who are the two going through to Silver Thread?"

"Gents, both of 'em, if they do be tenderfeet—true gents; one a son o' Settler Tremain, the big man o' the settlement; and t'other a young medicine-man going to practice there."

"Very well; let them go through with me, for there will doubtless be use for a medicine-man there, before long."

The landlord soon returned to the saloon, and going over to the table where the two young men sat, playing an innocent game of cards, said:

"Young fellers, you kin pack yer grips ter go through to morrow at daylight, and I'll have horses ready for yer."

"Is there a train going?"

"No, only one man."

"That splendid-looking fellow you were talking to?"

"Yes, ther same."

"But that will only make three of us!"

"Don't you fool yerself, young feller! It makes a dozen, for I'll tell yer a secret—that man be Buffalo Bill!"

CHAPTER II.

THE GIANT SPORT.

UPON the old idea that "when in Rome do as the Romans do," Allan Tremain was inveigled into a game of cards that night in the combined hotel, saloon and gambling-den of Landlord Sankey, and which was known as the "Last Chance Lay-out," it being the end of that branch of the Overland stage line.

To his credit be it said, Allan Tremain did not wish to play, but he also did not wish to anger the rough element about him, and so he and Doctor Donohue had entered into a little game with several miners and had won, they both being exceedingly fortunate.

The sums won were not large, and, chiming in with their surroundings, both had "stood treat," and were about to leave the saloon and retire early, preparatory to taking a daybreak start for Silver Thread Settlement the next morning with Buffalo Bill as their guide and comrade.

They had heard and read much of the famous scout, and when the landlord had imparted to them the secret of who he was, they had been most anxious to go with him on the trail which they had been told before would not be safe to travel with less than a score of men at least.

"I say, tenderfoot pards, you may be squar', and yer may not, but when strangers wins straight games in this part o' ther country, we honest men suspects 'em of bein' card-sharps, and you two galoots hain't lost a single game, and treatin' don't squar' yer in this crowd, as yer doubtless pays for the drinks with counterfeit money, while yer is too toney ter drink yerselves, but takes a segar."

This long and insulting speech was delivered by a man who suddenly stepped directly before the two friends as they were about to leave the saloon.

The man was half a dozen inches over six feet, broad-shouldered, quick of action, and

was known as the "Giant Sport," also as "Circus Sam, the Iron Man," he having once been the strong man of a circus, but openly confessed that he had killed two men and had been forced to fly for his life; hence had sought the congenial atmosphere of the Far West.

If there had been any doubt about his having been a slayer of men in the East, there certainly was not since he had come to the border, for he made it his boast that he had "his own private burying-ground, where he planted all those he killed at his own expense."

As a gambler he had wonderful luck, and playing cards and fighting was about all that he did until he was as greatly feared in one way as in the other.

When, therefore, the Giant Sport stepped up before the two young men from the East, and said what he did, there was a general hush in the large saloon, for those there knew that Circus Sam intended to treat the "tenderfeet" to a scene, nothing of a very startling nature having occurred in Trail End City since their arrival some days before.

All eyes were upon the two strangers, both of whom were finely-built, athletic young fellows, with the look of men who were not cowards, though unused to the ways of the wild West.

They were not attired in the frontier fashion either, but wore traveling suits and derby hats, which, in the eyes of Circus Sam, was a crime that should be atoned for, he being dressed in gray woolen shirt, buckskin leggings stuck in top-boots, wearing a broad sombrero and carrying a belt with a bowie-knife and three revolvers, while about his neck was swung a massive gold chain, and a diamond stud glittered in the black scarf knotted on his shirt-front.

"You speak such a jargon of slang and dialect that I do not know that I exactly catch your meaning, but it seems as though you accuse us of cheating at cards," said Allan Tremain quietly, and the crowd awaited with bated breath, for they felt that he did not know just who Circus Sam was.

"Waal, yer is right; I does say yer is card-sharps, ter win straight games as—"

He did not finish the sentence, for the right hand of Allan Tremain shot out with the force and quickness of a mule's hind leg, and the fist catching the bravo directly under the ear, sent him backward and downward in a heap.

"Good, Allan! You never gave a better blow when you were the champion heavyweight at college," cried Dallas Donohue, delighted at the knock-down blow of his friend.

But the end was not yet, for it was no college affair the two young men had to face, but a frontier game of life and death, as the bully arose with a yell of rage, with a revolver already in his hand, while he roared out the words:

"I'll have the lives of both of yer, fer Circus Sam never takes a blow, and lets the man live that gives it!"

"You are mistaken, pard," cried a ringing voice, and the tall form of Buffalo Bill glided into the room!

Seizing the arm of Circus Sam and wrenching the revolver from his grasp, he hurled him to the floor, where, putting his foot upon his neck, Buffalo Bill said sternly:

"Now ask that stranger's pardon for the insult you gave him or I will pin you to the floor with my bowie knife!"

CHAPTER III.

THE BRINK OF DEATH.

BUFFALO BILL had appeared to be unarmed, and with his long hair hidden under his slouch hat, and dressed in a hunting-suit more appropriate to the East than the West, he might also have been mistaken for a tenderfoot.

But the bowie with which he had threatened to pin the Giant Sport to the floor had suddenly appeared in his hand, his foot was hard across the throat of the prostrate man, and there was a dangerous light in his eyes as he made the threat, and Circus Sam saw it.

The Hercules Sport did not know who his antagonist was who had so quickly championed the cause of the two tenderfeet. This

champion was not his height by some inches, nor his weight by fifty pounds; but Sam, as did all the others, marveled at his wondrous quickness and physical strength, displayed in snatching the pistol from the Giant Sport's iron hand, then hurling him to the floor as though he had been any ordinary man.

The display of strength and cleverness had also caused the two young men to gaze with admiration at the scout, while, plucky and able to look after themselves, they pressed to the aid of their defender.

"If you move a finger to draw a weapon or attempt to rise, you'll sign your death-warrant, and I tell you now I'll stand no nonsense, so ask the pardon of these gentlemen for insulting them."

"Does yer call them gents?" hoarsely growled the bravo.

"Judged by your standard they are not; but, did you hear me?"

"What has you ter do with it?"

"I am a Western man, and they are strangers here, so shall not be insulted by such as you."

"Come, no delay, but ask their pardon as I tell you."

"Who is you?"

"Your friends will read the name of the man who killed you on your tombstone," was the alarmingly significant reply.

"Yas, and I has friends who will avenge me."

"It will be cheaper for you to apologize than to have your friends avenge you."

"S'pose I say I won't."

"Come! no nonsense! Ask their pardon or take the consequences!"

The foot of the scout bore more heavily upon the man's neck, while, suddenly dropping upon one knee, Buffalo Bill placed the point of his bowie-knife over the heart of the Giant Sport and said sternly:

"Obey me!"

There was a deep hush upon the crowd, and Allan Tremain and Doctor Donohue, who had been anxious to take the quarrel off the scout's hands, not realizing their danger, had been checked by Landlord Sankey, who said in a whisper:

"Don't chip in, young fellers, for yer'll be shot full o' holes, and he'll run ther game, for I told yer who he is."

In the hush that followed the scout's last command and act, the big bravo saw that he must for once back down, and fully realized his danger.

"You hear, pard, so talk quick," and the sharp point of Buffalo Bill's knife just pricked the skin over the bully's heart.

But it was hint enough, as he cried out:

"Then I asks yer pardon, gents, and, as I was downed, I says, step up all and take a drink, for it's my treat."

"I means you, too, pard, for you is ther first man who ever downed Circus Sam."

And he turned to Buffalo Bill who remarked:

"You forget the knock-down blow that gentleman gave you, and for which you, like a coward, intended to kill him and his companion. I drink with no such a bully as you are; and, though I do not wish to influence others, I would yet urge those two young gentlemen to refuse also, as you are only playing a game to win in the end."

"We will take your advice and refuse, sir," Tremain said, while, now on his feet once more, and with his weapons ready to grasp, Circus Sam said, savagely:

"Now, the man that refuses to drink with me, insults me and has to fight."

"What do you say, pard? for there is three ag'in' me, as you sees."

And the ruffian turned to the crowd, who had ranged in line for a drink at his expense, while his eyes fell upon those whom he could rely upon to back him up in a difficulty.

Buffalo Bill now knew that the bravo intended to force a fight that he might kill the two young men and himself, and a glance over the crowd showed that there was a dangerous element there who would be the backers of the Giant Sport.

What had to be done must be done quickly, and with nerve, so he seized upon the words of the bravo that there were three against him, and said:

"No; I alone am against you, and as you seem crying for a fight, fire away!"

The scout had drawn a weapon in a second

of time, and the bravo was covered before his hand could grasp his own revolver.

But there were others, his minions, who were now ready to support the Giant Sport, and one of them shouted:

"Draw, Sam, for I has him covered!"

"And I have you covered!"

"Up with your hands, quick, or I pull the trigger!"

And another person appeared upon the scene, a revolver in each hand, as he suddenly sprang between Buffalo Bill and his foes.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MYSTERIOUS MAN IN BLUE.

THE new-comer upon the scene, and at a moment when a scene of death would soon have been ushered in, riveted every eye upon him, save that of Buffalo Bill, who never took his gaze off the Giant Sport.

Had he done so, the lightning-like quickness with which Circus Sam could draw a weapon, and was noted for it, might have cost him his life.

The Giant Sport knew the voice of the new comer upon the scene, and was ready for Buffalo Bill to turn his head to see who he was, as he spoke as he entered the room.

But the scout was caught in no such fatal error, and yet he saw, without appearing to do so, an elegant form, slightly built, yet with the physique of an athlete, suddenly appear between him and the Giant Sport.

Nor was this all that the scout saw, for his attire was strikingly picturesque, being a dark-blue velvet jacket trimmed with silver lace and buttons, broadcloth pants of the same hue, and with a silver cord down the outer seam, and with top-boots of military pattern, the heels of which were armed with spurs.

A white silk *neglige* shirt with wide collar, a black scarf with a ruby in it, the match to which was upon the little finger of his left hand, a blue sombrero embroidered with silver, and a sash about his slender waist half-concealing his belt of arms, made up his striking appearance.

His face was beardless, youthful, for he seemed scarcely over twenty, and his features were refined and expressive, yet with a look upon them as though his life had been shadowed by some sorrow or crime.

Masses of waving hair fell below his shoulders, adding to his look an almost womanly appearance, and about him as he entered the saloon there was a look of recklessness as though he defied danger and gloried in risking life in a good cause.

That he was known to those present was shown by a chorus of voices crying out as he entered:

"The Man in Blue!"

"Now, pards, look out for deadly music!"

The situation was dramatic and thrilling. For a moment it seemed as though it would end in the cracking of a dozen revolvers, for the Giant Sport's friends had rallied when they saw him again under the shadow of death from the stranger whom no one there, save the landlord, seemed to know as Buffalo Bill.

"I said hands up! Did you hear?" and the Man in Blue broke the hush upon all by his clear, resonant voice.

As though his power was known and felt, the weapons that covered Buffalo Bill were lowered instantly, and as his eyes ran over the crowd the men belonging to the Giant Sport's clique raised their hands.

"Did you hear, sir?"

With a quick step forward the Man in Blue faced the Giant Sport and drove the muzzle of his revolver hard into his face.

Instantly the arms went up with a swing, and then the Man in Blue spoke, turning toward Buffalo Bill as though defying those his presence had subdued to fire upon him:

"You and your friends are strangers here, I see, sir, and it never fails that there are cowards in Trail End City to force them into deadly feuds."

"I have interests here, and am captain of the Vigilantes, so you need have no fear of further trouble, for my word goes."

"Will you all join me in a drink, gentlemen, and that means you, Circus Sam, and your pards?"

A wild cheer greeted the words of the Man in Blue, and turning to the bar he ordered

drinks and cigars set up for the crowd, who quickly gathered around to take advantage of a treat.

Buffalo Bill saw him replace his revolvers, and noted that, as he said, the trouble was over, at least for that time, for he was well aware that he had made Circus Sam and his followers his enemies for life.

But he replaced his revolver and gazed with deeper interest upon the strange man who had come to his aid.

He had often heard of the "Mysterious Man in Blue," as he was called, for other than that he was a prospector, or gold-hunter, roaming at will through the frontier, no one knew aught of him, it seemed.

It was said that he was the deadliest of shots, and had a record of having killed a number of men, forcing those who sought a quarrel with him, or with whom he had trouble, to meet him in a duel, thus giving them equal chances.

Rumor had it that he had found gold enough to make him a millionaire, but of that no one knew, for he still roamed the plains and mountains in quest of more, and was content to live a wild, dangerous existence to going where his riches would bring him every luxury.

"I have heard of you often, sir, and now am under a deep debt of gratitude to you, for in aiding these two gentlemen I woke up a hornets' nest," remarked Buffalo Bill.

"I have seen you before, sir, but, as you seem to be unknown here I will not speak your name—mine is Ford Belfont, and if you happen near where I have a camp at any time I will be glad to have you as my guest, you and your friends. Good-night," and tossing several bills on the bar the Mysterious Man in Blue raised his sombrero and left the saloon, the landlord leading Buffalo Bill and the two young men out quickly after him as though dreading further trouble.

CHAPTER V.

THE MAN FOR THE WORK.

"CODY, I sent for you to put your life in danger, for your invaluable services are needed."

So spoke Colonel Royall, Commandant of Fort Defiance, at which dangerous military post in the wildest of the Indian country, Buffalo Bill was chief of scouts at the time Ford was writing of.

"I am ready, colonel, for any service I can render the army, sir," was the prompt response of William Cody in answer to the words of his commandant.

"But let me tell you now, Cody, that this is not a military service you are going upon, for I am glad you so promptly accepted the mission I desire you to undertake."

"Whatever the duty, sir, I am under your orders, and will be glad to do all I can."

"I feel, I know that, and for just that reason I need you, as you are the man for the work, the man above all others who can do it successfully, though the risk you will run will be terrible."

"My life belongs to my country, sir."

"Well said, Cody, especially when I know that day and night you risk it in the performance of your arduous duties as chief of scouts at this post."

"But now to the work in hand."

"Yes, sir."

"I received some time ago an urgent letter from an old friend of mine, a boyhood friend, Judge Oswald Tremain, whose goodness of heart in indorsing for others ruined him financially and caused him to try and rebuild his fortunes."

"Accompanied by his wife and daughter, and leaving his son to graduate at Yale, and then follow him, the judge joined a large party of emigrants and settled in Silver Thread Valley, of which I believe you know something?"

"I have scouted and hunted through there sir, when there was not a cabin or a fort in a hundred miles of the valley."

"So I was assured, and you are therefore better fitted for the work in hand as you know the country."

"I know every foot of it, sir, I may say."

"Well, in spite of the strength of the settlement the Indians cause a great deal of trouble at times, but even worse than they, are the bands of outlaws, the road agents, who rob the messengers, the Pony Riders

bearing the mails, all wagon-trains and persons going to and fro.

"A weekly coach is now to be established to Silver Thread from Trail End City, and as the mines in the mountains are beginning to pay well, the outlaws will be more desperate in their efforts at robbery, and they are organized into a secret band that no one knows the retreat of, while, Judge Tremain writes me, there is reason to believe that some of the settlers are secretly outlaws, but who they cannot find out.

A Vigilante company was formed to hunt them down, and at once the outlaws began to hunt the Vigilantes, showing them no mercy, and marking each member for death, until in terror the band broke up to save their lives.

"Herds of cattle have been run off, horses stolen, houses raided, and the miners have been robbed in their camp and on the trail until a perfect reign of terror and death exists there, for even young girls have been kidnapped and held for ransom.

"Such is the situation; and Judge Tremain implores me to send a company of cavalry to the valley to put down the outlaws.

"This, however, I cannot do, as my powers are limited; but, desirous of helping him and the people, I thought over the matter, and suddenly it dawned upon me that you were the man for the work, and so I sent for you."

"I am ready to go, sir, and take as many men as you deem necessary, sir."

"That is just it, for I cannot spare a company, nor any of your scouts. In fact, I do not see how we will get along without you; but we must."

"Then I am to go alone, sir?"

"Alone, yes, Cody; but you are a host in yourself, and, as I said before, the very man for the desperate work to be done."

"How shall I go about it, sir?"

"That you must decide. I will give you the authority of a United States Marshal, which I can do, and place no limit upon you as to time, so go about the matter in your own clever way.

"I'll give you a letter to Judge Tremain, but to all others you had better remain unknown until you deem it best to take off your mask, so to speak.

"When do you think you can start, sir?"

"Within the hour, sir."

"Take longer time, if you wish, and yet delays are dangerous, you know."

"I will go at once and get ready, sir."

"It is a long trail, and I will carry a pack-horse with me, for I suppose the duty will detain me perhaps for several months."

"All of that, and for all expenses needed the paymaster will fit you out."

Thus it was that Buffalo Bill started upon his secret mission, his trail leading him through Trail End City, where he so strangely and opportunely arrived in time to go to the rescue of Allan Tremain and Doctor Donohue, whom the Giant Sport had singled out for his victims.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DEADLY WARNING.

WHEN the day dawned upon Trail End City, Buffalo Bill and his two "tenderfoot pards," as he called them, were a mile on their trail to Silver Thread Settlement.

The scout found them pleasant companions, intelligent, cheery fellows, ready for any hardship, and he had seen their courage put very severely to the test the night before, and knew that he could trust them in a close place.

He had suggested their buckling on a belt of arms each, and securing rifles, and these weapons Landlord Sankey had for sale, as he had a supply on hand left by his guests who had been killed soon after arriving in Trail End City.

They were both well mounted, too, and being fine riders and fair shots, the scout told them it would not take long to take the tenderfoot out of them.

The trail was a long one, in places dangerous from meeting bands of roving redskins, and almost anywhere along it there was a possibility of meeting road agents, if half the tales were true that were told of the outlaws' doings in the valley and on the trails leading to it.

"We will camp early to-night, pards, as

we can make the valley in good time to-morrow night," said Bill, and he was looking about for a good camping-place, where wood, water and grass could be found, when he suddenly drew rein, for there was heard the clatter of hoofs ahead on the trail, and the next moment a horse dashed into view.

But the horse held a rider all saw at a glance, and a thrill of horror shot through them as they beheld him.

It was a man, and he was stretched out on the back of the horse to which he was securely bound.

As the horse was dashing on at full speed, the form bound to his back, he neighed wildly at the sight of the horsemen, yet did not check his mad career.

Buffalo Bill, now on the alert, gathered his lasso, ready to act in the startling emergency.

Nearer came the frightened steed, with its frightful burden, and then the scout sent his lasso flying through the air, and the frightened horse and his rider were brought to a sudden halt.

"My God! the man is dead!" cried Doctor Donohue as he sprang to the side of the horse and felt the pulse of the man in irons, while Buffalo Bill cut the thorn-bush, and then pointing to a wound in his side, said:

"With that knife-thrust in his heart, yes."

"I did not see that wound. It means red work has been done."

"Yes, doctor; but, see! here in this hand!"

One of the hands, the right, was tightly clasped, and bound thus with buckskin thongs, but in it was clasped a piece of paper which Buffalo Bill drew out and read aloud.

It was as follows:

"WARNING!"

"By this, the last one of the members of the Silver Thread Valley Vigilantes, we send this warning that should another band be raised to put us down, taking from us our rights of outlawry, we will again put to death each and every one of them.

"The last band of Vigilantes numbered twenty-one, and the last, their captain, bears this warning to you, settlers of Silver Thread Valley, for his four comrades lie dead and manacled, awaiting burial, on the summit of Lookout Mound.

"Go there and you will find them, and heed not this warning if you dare.

"THE BOYS IN BLACK."

Buffalo Bill's fine face paled as he read this, and then he said:

"We will go on and see if they have done as they said, for Lookout Mound is about ten miles from here, and there is a good camp near it.

"We will carry this poor fellow along and bury him with the rest, for though the night will be cloudy and black, I have a dark-lantern by which I can follow the trail.

"They evidently expected the poor horse to go to the settlement, but in his fright and suffering he got off the trail."

With this the horse was taken in lead and the party moved on, Buffalo Bill leading and not a word being spoken, for the tragedy they had come upon so suddenly had impressed them all deeply.

Night soon fell, but the scout led on unerringly, though the darkness at times was intense, and the two young men wondered how he could find his way in the midnight gloom.

But at last Buffalo Bill said:

"There looms up Lookout Mound before us, and I have heard that it has been the scene of many a tragedy—I know of one that happened here in which I was an actor.

"I will light my lantern, for the trail up to the summit is a rough and dangerous one."

The scout dismounted, lighted his lantern, and as he moved on up the trail Tremain and Donohue followed him, leading their horses.

At last the summit was reached and bending forward Buffalo Bill flashed his lantern upon four dark forms that lay manacled in death at his feet.

As he did so out of the darkness behind him came a burst of wild, demoniacal laughter.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SCOUT'S VOW.

THE laugh which was heard by Buffalo Bill and his two companions, coming as it did out of the darkness, caused the scout at once to close the lantern slide he held in his hand, and leave all gloom about them, while he said quickly in a low whisper:

"Come this way to shelter, as we may get a shot."

The two young men hastily obeyed, and all three led their horses over to the other side of the mound and there remained silent and watchful.

"What a wild laugh!" whispered Allan Tremain.

"Yes, it was the laughter of a madman," returned Doctor Donohue, in the same low tone, while Buffalo Bill remarked:

"I believe you have struck it, doctor; it did sound like the laugh of a madman, and its not being repeated leads me to believe that some poor unfortunate fellow is near us."

Hardly had the scout spoken when once again was heard the burst of wild laughter. It came from out of the gloom several hundred feet away and at the base of the large mound, and as its echoes ceased, a voice cried in deep tones:

"He laughs best that laughs last. Now is my time for joy, for Buffalo Bill is on the trail!"

"Now is my time to be avenged—ha! ha! ha!"

"There will be red work now in Silver Thread Valley—ha! ha! ha!"

The voice died away in the distance; the clatter of hoofs that followed grew fainter and fainter until, at last, it died from hearing in the distance.

"Well, pards, what do you think of the Wild West as far as you have got?" queried Buffalo Bill, dryly, when the sound of retreating hoofs no longer came to their ears.

"A remarkable country, indeed, scout—full of surprises that are startling," answered Allan Tremain.

"Yes, and with people as startling as their surprises," added the young doctor.

"We are tenderfeet and cannot deny it, but we are beginning to catch on fast. I do not wonder that this country produces wonderful men.

"We thought we knew it all, but we are as innocent as babes out here, and if you were not with us we would be as helpless."

"Well, doctor, you'll soon learn, and you will make good plainsmen with the nerve you have, for it requires nerve as the first of all acquisitions to live out here.

"But now to our wild man."

"Yes, he called your name."

"That is what surprised me."

"And did he mean that he would avenge himself upon you, or that you would avenge him now that you were here?"

"That was not exactly clear to me, Mr. Tremain; but let it be one way or the other I do not care, for all goes. I am here for a purpose, and that purpose will be accomplished if I live.

"Now let us seek a camp. There is a good one not far away, but we must pack those bodies with us, or the coyotes would soon be after them."

"The dead men will outnumber the living in our camp," observed young Tremain, but he willingly assisted in placing the bodies upon the horses.

This done, the two friends followed the lead of the scout down the rugged trail to a place where there was an excellent camp.

"There have been campers recently here—the Boys in Black, as they signed themselves. It was they who murdered these poor fellows," and Buffalo Bill pointed to the smoldering remains of a camp fire.

A fire was soon started and the horses staked out, after which the four bodies found at the mound, and the one brought along, which, Mazeppa-like, had been found bound to his horse, were placed side by side in the shadow of some *pinon* trees near by.

Supper was cooked and disposed of, after which the two young men were glad to seek their blankets, their first outdoor camp upon the far frontier.

The scout said that he would keep watch, and when he had scouted about the camp

and found all quiet, and the horses feeding as though no danger was near, he halted by the bodies of the five dead, manacled forms.

Standing there with uncovered head, as the firelight fell upon the dead, Buffalo Bill said, in a low, stern voice:

"I came here to do my duty, and I now make a solemn vow to avenge these murdered men."

CHAPTER VIII.

CAUGHT IN THE ACT.

"Ah! this looks suspicious."

Buffalo Bill drew rein as he spoke and gazed fixedly down at the ground.

What he saw that "looked suspicious," Allan Tremain and Doctor Donohue could not discover, but they watched him closely.

They had passed the night in their first camp in undisturbed rest, and, in the morning, had buried the five dead men, the scout removing the irons by unlocking them with keys from a bunch he carried, and remarking as he did so, in his quiet way:

"These are consecrated to revenge, and will be useful some day."

The young men had watched him place heavy logs over the large grave, to keep the coyotes away, and Tremain said in a low tone

"We are learning, Doc."

"How can we help doing so with a teacher who knows more about frontier life than our great professor at Yale does of the Greeks."

After going a couple of hours' ride on the trail, they saw the scout halt at something suspicious he had discovered. They watched him attentively and curiously.

At last Buffalo Bill said:

"We'll follow this trail, pard."

"What trail?"

"This one that crosses ours."

"I don't see any, but I suppose it is there," young Tremain remarked.

"Oh, yes, it is there, though faint, I admit."

"Now, this trail, you see, comes from over yonder on that range, and it crosses ours and branches off to the left, which indicates to me that, whoever left the trail, saw us coming from yonder spur; and so, knowing that we were following the direct track to Silver Thread Valley, crossed here to get on ahead to the range, twenty miles away yonder, and there ambush us."

"Now, if we follow their trail, we will surprise them, you understand, not they us, so we will just branch off and see what it will turn out. We will not be taken very far off our trail to the valley."

"Then, too, we could have come by a shorter trail from Trail End City, and which would have brought us by yonder spur, as this one leads, so that some one from the camps may have decided to head us off here and get even for the little pow-wow of night before last."

"I came this trail as it is the safest one, though longer; and it is well we did, having made the discovery on it of the five murdered Vigilantes."

"You read signs as though you were reading an open book before you, Mr. Cody," said Allan Tremain.

"It is wonderful," the doctor coincided and added:

"We are in your hands, so command and we obey; but first show me what you call a fresh trail crossing the one we are traveling?"

"See here; though the ground is hard, you can see faint traces on it which are made by ironshod horses."

"I can trace it back yonder, and on ahead for quite a distance."

"Yes; now that you speak of it, we can see it, but never would have noticed it otherwise."

"You will soon learn to take note of every sign out here, doctor, for therein is the virtue of being a good plainsman."

"Now we will go on."

And the scout led the way once more, the others following, leading the pack-horse and the animal that had been found with the man tied upon his back.

A tract of low, wooded country was soon after passed through, and then came the

foot-hills of the range towering ahead, and beyond which lay the Silver Thread Valley.

Unerringly the scout followed the trail, remarking, after several miles had been gone over and having come to spots where the tracks were plainly visible:

"There were five horses."

"That means as many men?"

"Not necessarily, Mr. Tremain, as they may have had a led horse along."

"True."

"But my idea is, from watching the tracks, that there are three men, as two of the trails swerve as though the horses were led."

"Then if you expect trouble with them, there is one each."

"Yes, doctor, unless we are caught in an ambush, and then one man in cover is worth half a dozen riding upon him."

"True."

"But if they intend to ambush us, it will be on the trail we were following, and, by striking them in the rear, we will have the advantage."

"When we reach further in the foot-hills, I will go ahead on foot a' l of an eighth of a mile, leaving you to follow."

At a point further on, Buffalo Bill dismounted and went on ahead, the two young men slowly following with his horse and the led animals, and watching the trail closely so as not to go astray.

They had gone about a mile, when they found the scout waiting for them.

"There they are, half a mile away, lying in wait on the trail we would have taken."

"There are five horses, but I cannot see all the men, and they are protected well where they are from any one approaching on the other trail, but you see we have flanked them."

"We can only ride on our way from here, and when they see us, if they wish to attack us let them do so."

And Buffalo Bill mounted and rode slowly out of the shelter of the hills on toward the high range some miles ahead of them.

They had gone but a short distance when the men in ambush discovered them.

CHAPTER IX.

THE UNTOLD SECRET.

WHEN those they were lying in wait to catch were suddenly discovered in the rear, having flanked them, there was great excitement.

Their horses were staked out a couple of hundred yards from where they were in ambush among some rocks overgrown with scrub-pines.

To their horses they ran with full speed, carrying their rifles in their hands, and as they broke cover Buffalo Bill said, quietly:

"There are three of them."

"Now you will have a chance for a border fight."

"Then you will attack them?"

"No, doctor, they have been caught in the act and so will attack us."

"Then it will be three to three, so tell us what to do."

"Let them first show their hands," said Buffalo Bill, and he rode quietly on toward the range.

The three men had reached their horses meanwhile, hastily bridled them, and leaving two still staked out, came riding rapidly toward Buffalo Bill and his companions, one of them waving his hat and shouting as he did so.

"They wish us to halt, so their intentions cannot be hostile after all," said Allan Tremain.

Buffalo Bill smiled and said:

"It is a ruse, a trick, for they have been caught in an ugly business, and they wish to try and make us believe our own eyes deceived us."

"Then you will not accept their friendly offers?"

"Did we do so our toes would be turned up within five minutes."

"That is their game, to pretend friendship, catch us off our guard and then suddenly open fire upon us."

"Hark!"

As the scout spoke one of the men hailed and called out:

"Ho, pards, come here, for we were watch-

ing red-skins, and there are more than we can handle."

"Come on and join us in standing them off."

"Why they are all right," said Doctor Donohue.

"Yes, friendly enough," added Allan Tremain.

But Buffalo Bill's answer to the words of the man, as he and his two comrades had now halted within a couple of hundred yards, was to suddenly throw his rifle to his shoulder and call out:

"Hands up all of you!"

"You are the Indians we have to fear!"

"Give it to them, pards, for they are on to us!"

"We has got to fight," came in the voice of the one who had before spoken, and instantly they dropped from their saddles down on the off-side of their horses, and their rifles were fired almost together.

But Buffalo Bill had pulled trigger too, and though he had only a man's head to aim at, his bullet sped true and one of the trio went down, while their fire killed the scout's pack horse and slightly wounded Allan Tremain in the arm.

Buffalo Bill's two comrades had not been slow in realizing that he was right, that the three men were treacherous and foes to the bitter end.

Before the scout could tell them to take their horses as a shelter, they had slipped from their saddles, had their rifles leveled and pulled trigger.

"Bravo! you got one man and a horse," cried Buffalo Bill as he saw one of the two men drop and the horse of the other also go down his rider throwing himself quickly behind him.

"Now, hands up, or take the home trail!" shouted Buffalo Bill, willing to be merciful.

But the man fired and his shot dropped the doctor's horse, while, leaping to his feet, he sprung into the saddle of one of his comrade's horses and darted away, firing as he rode.

But he had not made half a-dozen rods before the rifle of Buffalo Bill again cracked, and he fell heavily to the ground.

"Wiped out," coolly said Buffalo Bill, and turning to Allan Tremain he continued:

"Now, pard, you were hit, I believe?"

"Slightly, in the arm, but as it gives Donohue his first case, I should not, as his friend, complain," was the plucky response of Allan Tremain.

"Well, I leave you in the doctor's hands, while I look after those two loose horses," and Buffalo Bill, seeing that Tremain's wound was not serious, rode off at a gallop to where the three men had fallen, and two of their horses were feeding near.

"Ho, doctor, here is another case for you," cried the scout, as he found that one of the men was still alive.

As the wound had been quickly bandaged, Doctor Donohue and Tremain came quickly toward the scout who said:

"Who fired at the man on the right?"

"I did," called out Tremain.

"Then you are avenged, Mr. Tremain, for the man will die," and Buffalo Bill had placed the wounded man in a more comfortable position, and was doing all he could to relieve him in his sufferings.

Dallas Donohue quickly knelt by the wounded man and said in a kindly tone:

"My poor fellow, your wound is fatal, so if you have anything to say, let me urge you to speak now."

The man's eyes rested upon the face of one then another, until at last he said faintly:

"I deserve my fate."

"It was the Giant Sport who sent us to kill and rob you men, and there is a secret I wish to tell you that—"

But he said no more, but after several convulsive shudders, and striving to speak, his head dropped back and he was dead.

CHAPTER X.

SILVER THREAD VALLEY.

SILVER THREAD VALLEY was a perfect garden of beauty in the midst of a wilderness.

The Silver Thread River ran through it for a distance of twenty miles, winding its way

along, a clear stream flowing over a pebbly bottom, and indeed in the distance looking like a thread of silver embroidered in green velvet, for the banks, meadows and hill lands on either side were bright and beautiful in the first bloom of spring.

Into this valley had gone a number of well-to-do people to find homes, and adjacent to them were mining claims in the mountains, while upon the plains beyond were some ranches, each numbering several hundred cattle and horses.

The most prominent man of the settlement was Judge Oswald Tremain, who has before been spoken of, and what he had left of his own fine fortune he had expended in making a new home for himself and family.

His cabin was a large one, well built, with encircling piazzas, and the judge had brought along over many a weary mile furniture enough to furnish it well, with horses, cattle and domestic fowls, to make an ideal home in the wilds of the West.

The family of the judge consisted of his wife and daughter, Myrtle, a beautiful girl of eighteen, his son Allan being, at the time of which I write, then on his way to his new home under the guidance of Buffalo Bill.

There was another member of the family, a young girl by the name of Blanche Vassar, and one more lovely in face and form it would have been difficult to find.

Blanche Vassar's life had had its shadows, rather than its sunshine, for her father had, years before, killed a man, as he asserted in self-defense, yet having no other proof than his word, and circumstantial evidence being against him, he had been tried, found guilty and sentenced to be hanged.

The trial was held before Judge Tremain, who plainly charged the jury that there was not proof sufficient to prove guilt; yet, in spite of this, the verdict had been brought in against Carl Vassar, and the sentence of death was passed upon him.

An appeal was taken, but again was the verdict the same, and Carl Vassar appeared to be doomed to die upon the gallows, when one night he mysteriously escaped from prison, and all search for him was in vain.

His fortune had been nearly swamped in his trials, and he left his wife and daughter a little home and a small income.

But the mother died, and Blanche, then in her fifteenth year, was sent to the same fashionable boarding-school that Myrtle Tremain attended, and the two became fast friends.

Soon after the judge lost his fortune, and in his calamity there came to him a letter from Mexico.

It was from Carl Vassar, and told him that he was making a fortune there, that he had heard of the judge's misfortunes, and his intention was to go to the Far West, and he sent to him a map of a valley he knew of, and which was the very place to establish a settlement.

The letter also begged the judge to become the guardian of his child, to take her with him, and then he could one day visit her and inclosed a draft for all expenses that might arise for Blanche.

Thus it was that the fugitive's daughter became the ward of the man who had sentenced him to die upon the gallows years before.

A noble-hearted, splendid girl, Blanche was beloved by both the judge and his wife, and Myrtle loved her as dearly as though she had been her own sister.

At the suggestion of Carl Vassar, following the directions on the map, Judge Tremain had sought the valley he spoke of, his advice carrying thither the other settlers he was journeying westward with, and thus it was that Silver Thread became their abiding-place, while, with a strong settlement near, miners began to hunt gold in the mountains near by and cattle-men to establish ranches not far distant, where they could feel secure.

For a year the settlement had only the Indians to dread, and then sprung up a new evil in the bands of outlaws that began to raid the homes and lie in wait upon the trails.

As the evils grew worse, Judge Tremain had written a pleading letter to his old friend Colonel Royall, at Fort Defiance, for help, with the result that one man, Buffalo Bill,

was sent to the rescue, to free the country of the lawless element.

But, before the arrival of Buffalo Bill matters grew rapidly worse, for the settlers who had formed a band of Vigilantes were being picked off by the outlaws, who had doomed them to die in revenge for having captured and hanged several of their lawless comrades.

Thus matters stood while Buffalo Bill and his two tenderfoot pals were wending their way toward Silver Thread Valley.

CHAPTER XI.

THE FUGITIVE'S DAUGHTER.

SINCE arriving at their new home, Blanche had received letters regularly from her father, and Judge Tremain had also heard from him often, and been asked to build his cabin for him, the situation being a most beautiful one, which Carl Vassar had marked out on the map as his own.

It adjoined the ranch of the Judge, and the plans sent for building the cabin were of quite an extensive kind, the fugitive saying in his last letter:

"I hope soon to be with you, and to enjoy the latter years of my life in my new home, for I have papers with me which will go to prove that my plea of self defense, when I killed King Claxton, was true, and that I was falsely accused.

"My riches earned here in Mexico gave me the power to set the machinery in motion to prove my innocence, and I can demand a pardon of the governor and live with no further dread upon me, blessed in the love of my darling daughter whom I have not seen since she was a little girl of seven."

Looking forward to the coming of her father before many months, Blanche Vassar was a happy girl, and every afternoon was wont to mount her horse and ride the two miles to her new home to see how matters progressed there, for the judge was carrying out the plans of Mr. Vassar fully.

Generally Blanche was accompanied by Myrtle, but the latter pleading a desire to help her mother, one afternoon, as her brother and his friend, Doctor Donohue, who was coming as the physician of the settlement, being almost daily expected, they were getting all in readiness for their arrival, as it was thought that a wagon-train would soon come through with supplies from Trail End City.

So Blanche went alone, and after visiting the cabin, from whence a grand view of the valley and its farms could be had, she started on a long ride back, going, as was her wont, by a trail that led her many miles around, but every step of the way of which the scenery was beautiful.

There were several places along this trail where she was miles from the nearest habitation, but, mounted upon her fleet and tireless white mare Snowflake, she had no fear, and was dashing swiftly along when suddenly out of a canyon dashed a horseman, who, seeing her, called loudly:

"Turn about for your life, miss."

"I am pursued by outlaws!"

Instantly Blanche wheeled her horse, but not to fly until the horseman dashed up to her side and cried:

"Quick! they are upon us!"

As he spoke there appeared in view several horsemen, mounted on black horses and dressed in black, while their faces were masked.

"The Boys in Black!"

"It is time to fly!" and Blanche, recognizing at a glance the scourge of the valley laid the whip sharply upon Snowflake, just as several rifles sent bullets rattling after them.

"Cowards! to fire upon a woman! And they have wounded your horse, miss!" said horseman, now dashing along by the side of Blanche, who, seeing his face deathly pale, and his hand pressed hard upon his side, where his clothes were stained crimson, cried:

"And you are wounded, sir?"

"It was given me some miles back, and I feel that it is serious—but we must ride faster—ah! your horse feels his wound as I feel mine," and the man seemed gasping for

breath, while Snowflake, bleeding from a wound in her flank, was stumbling badly and not running with her accustomed speed.

"They have given up the chase, sir," cried Blanche, as she saw the pursuing horsemen come to a halt.

"And I too must halt, for I can go no further, I—"

They dashed over a rise out of sight as the horseman spoke, and reeling in his saddle he suddenly fell heavily to the ground, while Blanche, in a vain effort to hold him up, felt Snowflake go down beneath her.

Nimble the young girl caught on her feet, and as she did so managed to grasp the rein of the stranger's horse, and checking his speed quickly threw the rein over the limb of a tree near by and hastened back to the fallen man.

He lay upon his back, having twice attempted to rise after his fall, one hand clinched and pressed upon his wound, the other lying out limp by his side.

His face bore the hue of death, and, kneeling by his side, Blanche placed her gloved hand over his heart.

It seemed forever stilled; but the fingers of the girl touched a leather case which involuntarily she drew out from its resting-place by the wound, and, glancing at it, saw that it contained two photographs—one of her dead mother the other of herself.

Then all her own danger was forgotten, all else but the fact that the man who lay dead at her feet was her own father.

She stared at the photographs as though she read there the story, for she had a similar likeness of her mother at home, and the one of herself had been taken when she was a little girl, and she also had one like it.

"My God! it is my father, and they have killed him."

"I did not know him, but did he not know me, I wonder?—oh, Heaven have mercy! yet another cruel, cruel blow falls upon my life!"

And, dropping down upon her knees by the form of her father, the fugitive's daughter buried her face in her hands, wholly unconscious that her foes were again coming in chase of her, having seen what had occurred from a distance.

CHAPTER XII.

THE PROTEST OF A BULLET.

BENT in sorrow over the dead form of her father, for Blanche Vassar's heart had told her that he was dead, she did not even hear the coming of the horsemen who had pursued her, and who had dealt her the cruel blow by slaying her father just as he was in sight of his new home, just as he was almost within reach of her welcome.

If she heard their coming, she did not heed.

Seeing this, they came on more slowly, gazing at the scene with their masks hiding all feeling of pity that might have welled up in their bosoms at the sight.

They were five in number, all mounted on jet black horses, while they were clad in black pants, shirts and sombreros, making a gloomy-looking lot, and defiantly wearing their garb, the emblem of their calling as outlaws, into the very midst of the settlement.

The picture that they saw as they rode up was a touching and sublime one.

There to a tree was hitched the fine horse of the dead man, with Mexican trappings upon him, and upon the ground, thirty paces distant, lay the dead animal of Blanche.

The form of the fugitive, returning from his long stay in a foreign land, and killed upon almost the threshold of his home and happiness, lay where he had fallen, his darkly bronzed and bearded face turned upward, one hand still pressed over his wound, as though he had grasped from the pocket there the morocco case with the photographs of his treasured ones.

The other hand was now held by Blanche, as she crouched by her father's side, and fast fell her tears upon it, while her whole form shook with emotion.

Nearer and nearer drew the murderers, until they halted within twenty paces of the young girl.

But still she moved not.

Then the leader dismounted, and as he advanced to within a few feet of Blanche, he paused and gazed upon her for full a minute.

At last he spoke, and there was not an atom of pity in tone or words.

"A pretty picture, miss, but our time is precious and it must be broken in upon."

"I am sorry I have not my pencil and paper with me to sketch the scene, but I have not, and then, too, the grief is feigned—feigned to try and make us give up our prize."

She looked up, her eyes flashing, and said, almost fiercely, as she faced him:

"Feigned!"

"Can grief for a father be feigned?"

"A father?"

"Yes, my father, and you have murdered him."

"That man your father?"

"I tell you yes."

"Bahl! Carl Vassar had a wife and child but both are dead."

"It is a lie, for I, his daughter, am alive. Yes, and I shall live to yet avenge his cruel murder."

"A woman's threat is like a woman's vow of love, made to be broken."

"You insult me over the dead body of my father, whose name you but just now spoke?"

"Yes, I know him."

"Were it not that you but now spoke his name, I would not believe you."

"I tell you the truth, for I knew him years ago."

"Who are you?"

"The telling will not please you; that is, if you know anything of your father's past life, if you are, indeed, his daughter."

"I vow that I am his daughter, my name is Blanche Vassar, and I know all of his cruel past, for he was forced to fly to save himself from the gallows, his life being sworn away by those who he supposed would tell the truth, yet swore falsely to condemn him."

"I believe that you are his daughter."

"But then he has just come from Mexico, and he is well supplied with funds which I want and will have."

"We held him up, but he resisted, killing one of my men, and wounding another who will also die, I fear."

"I hope so, for he deserved his fate," was the plucky response of Blanche Vassar.

"But a lasso dragged him from his saddle, and we captured and disarmed him."

"Then, when we did not expect it, he leaped into his saddle and was away."

"I fired to stop him, for I had recognized him as my old friend, Carl Vassar, but did not believe that I had hit him."

"Now it seems, however, that my bullet was not so badly aimed and did the work I intended."

"And you coolly stand here and tell a daughter how you murdered her father?"

"I will tell you more, girl, I will tell you that it was a woman who caused King Claxton's death."

"I will tell you that she loved your father, and at one time they were engaged."

"Then he discovered that she had told him a falsehood and the engagement was broken and he married your mother."

"But she was not one to forgive or forget, and she was a beautiful woman who fascinated all men she met."

"One of them, King Claxton, loved her, and she promised to marry him if he would seek a quarrel with Carl Vassar, your father, and kill him."

"The man did his duty, but Vassar killed him."

"I saw the affair, and it was my testimony that was the cause of your father being found guilty, that and the fact that the jury was bought with money supplied by the woman and Claxton's friends."

"Your father escaped, and to-day he crossed my path again, and now I come face to face with his beautiful daughter, and this is fate, a fate that I shall take advantage of, so, Miss Vassar, you are my prisoner, and outcries and resistance will be in vain, for if you do not submit quietly to go with me, I shall have to put these steel bracelets upon your slender wrists, and force a gag between those pretty teeth as well."

"Now, what is your pleasure?"

The man stepped closer to her as he spoke, and as she drew back in horror from his touch he called out to one of his men:

"Seize her!"

With a leap the man sprung to her side and grasped her rudely by the arm.

But as he did so there came the crack of a rifle fired at long range, and the man dropped in his tracks, while Blanche Vassar drew the knife from his belt as he fell dead at her feet and stood at bay facing the masked Boys in Black.

CHAPTER XIII.

A SHOT AT LONG RANGE.

"In an hour more, pards, we will be down in the Silver Thread Valley, and I have a treat in store for you in just one minute—now see there!"

Buffalo Bill as he spoke had neared the top of the range that looked down into Silver Thread Valley.

It was the day following their adventure at Lookout Mound, and they had been delayed in burying the dead outlaws who had left Trail End City to ambush and kill them, for Buffalo Bill never allowed even a red-skin's body to go without decent burial, for, as he said:

"Death cancels all hatred, and they are human beings who demand of us the same treatment we would hope for for ourselves."

The party had journeyed along at a good gait, though they had an additional horse to lead, and remembering the view he would surprise his companions with Buffalo Bill had said what he did.

When the two young men beheld the valley, with the river running indeed like a silver thread through it, and dotting the landscape here and there the homes of the settlers, they were spellbound with admiration.

"I do not know just where your father is located, Mr. Tremain, for I have not been here since the valley has been settled."

"There is a group of cabins up toward the upper end, and I suppose the store, the meeting-house and blacksmith shop are there—my glass will tell me—and the trail leads there after we have gotten down into the valley."

Turning his field-glass upon the distant group of cabins Buffalo Bill continued:

"Yes, I suppose that is what they call the village of Silver Thread City, for they have a way out here of putting City even to a mining-camp, for instance Trail End City with its five hundred souls."

"Yes; I see some very fine houses scattered about, and which one could hardly expect to find in so new a community."

"Turn your glasses upon the one on the slope, miles away on the right, and there is another this side, which appears to be just being built, for I see men working there."

"It will take us until night, so shall we ride on?"

The young men were loud in their praise of the beauty of the scenery, and as they rode on down into the valley expressed their admiration.

At length they came to a rise, and the scout suddenly drew rein before going over.

"See anything suspicious, scout?" asked Allan Tremain, and he too halted, while Doctor Dallas Donohue remarked:

"If it is to be another fight, I hope it will be with Indians, for we have had a couple of brushes with outlaws, and I have a consuming curiosity to behold a wild savage on the war-path."

"Sh! there is trouble ahead."

"Dismount, hitch your horses, and keep out of sight."

The command and the serious manner of the scout made the two young men at once obey, and when they came near Buffalo Bill they saw that he was very attentively regarding some scene through his glass.

"There is trouble ahead," he said.

"What is it, scout?"

"If I mistake not, there has been an ambush of some one, for I see a dead man and a dead body, a woman in riding-habit, and some forms clad in black, and I have heard that the road agents on these trails call themselves the Boys in Black; yes, and by Heaven, they are masked!"

The scout seemed to be at fault as to just what was to be done, and the young men, peering through their glasses, the three shel-

tered by some pines, saw what he had pointed out, and Allan Tremain remarked:

"Yes, they are clad in black, and masked, as I can plainly see."

"And I count five of them, and one woman, while a man's form lies near, apparently dead," added Doctor Donohue.

"If the woman is in trouble, Mr. Cody, we ought to go to her aid," Allan Tremain said, while Doctor Donohue quietly rejoined:

"Yes, indeed, for odds against us are not to be counted where a woman demands our help."

"Good for you, pards!"

"I like your grit, and you bet we will help her out—hal! one of them has grasped the woman's arm; it is a risky shot at such long range, but I'll try it," and Buffalo Bill threw his rifle to his shoulder, took quick aim and pulled trigger.

CHAPTER XIV.

FOR A WOMAN'S SAKE.

At the words and act of Buffalo Bill, the two friends glanced quickly toward each other.

They were evidently anxious at the risk he was taking, at a shot at such long range and which he had acknowledged.

They saw that the group they were watching were close together, and in the midst of the black-garbed forms was a woman, and it must be that she was at their mercy.

Could it be that Buffalo Bill, and at the range of five hundred yards, could kill the one at whom he aimed and not hit another, an innocent one?

It did not seem possible, and they were about to remonstrate, but they saw that the woman was in terror of the man and already was the scout's rifle-butt against his shoulder, his piercing eye glancing along the barrel.

They dared not speak then, and stood in breathless suspense, watching him, not the effect of his shot.

It was a quick aim that he took, appallingly quick thought Tremain and Donohue, when so much depended upon it, and with the crack of the rifle the eyes of all were strained for a glance at the result.

There was no exclamation of triumph from the scout's lips, for he seemed to know his power, to have felt just what he could do; but both Tremain and Donohue gave vent to a fervent ejaculation of thanksgiving at the result, followed by a shout of triumph as they saw the man who had attacked the woman drop in his tracks as though dead.

They saw also the woman bend quickly, seize his knife from his belt and stand at bay, and they beheld the masked men, startled by the shot and its deadly result, look in the direction from whence it had come and then bound toward their horses.

The stern voice that recalled them they heard, and the command:

"We must fly, but we take that girl with us, men!"

At the words, Buffalo Bill, who was turning toward his horse, wheeled quickly and called out:

"No, but you shall not take her with you!"

Again his rifle went to his shoulder, once more there was a quick aim and the report followed.

"I hope I got the leader, for he is the one I want, but I do not know, so picked one at random," said Buffalo Bill.

"You got your man, though, for another has gone down," cried Tremain, exultantly.

"Yes, that makes three men now—three to three," Donohue called out, and the three bounded to their horses, for they saw Buffalo Bill preparing to mount.

"Now come for that brave woman's sake," cried the scout, and he dashed over the ridge with one of his wild war-cries that fairly startled his companions and awakened a hundred echoes in the valley.

The masked Boys in Black had obeyed their chief, in that they had made another effort to seize Blanche Vassar, who, with the bowie-knife she had seized from the belt of the fallen outlaw, stood at bay as Buffalo Bill, from beyond the ridge, was preparing to fire again.

One of the men nearest to her, and who was preparing to rush in and grasp her up-lifted arm was the recipient of the second long range shot from Buffalo Bill.

Seeing him fall the leader uttered a savage oath and hissed forth the words:

"I will take you with me, girl, or die trying."

He was preparing to make good his boast when the wild war-cry of Buffalo Bill came to his ears, and his men, seeing the scout dash over the ridge, fled to their horses in terror and threw themselves into their saddles, one of them calling out:

"Remember where you are, chief."

"Fly, or we are lost!"

But the one he addressed seemed determined to carry out his threat, and made a move toward Blanche Vassar, while he called out sternly:

"Down with that knife, girl!"

"No, I shall kill you with it if you touch me," was the firm reply.

The man saw that she was in earnest, he saw that she was in a dangerous mood and had the pluck to execute her threat.

She was not awkward in handling her knife, and stood at bay a beautiful picture, but a dangerous one, and he hesitated.

A glance showed him that the horseman coming over the ridge was not alone, as he had suspected was the case.

One, two others followed, and there might be more.

His men were already flying for their lives, and he knew that it was death for him to remain.

"Another time, my beauty, we will meet again," he shouted savagely, and with a bound had reached his horse.

In an instant he was in the saddle, his splendid horse flying away with him, while a few moments after up dashed Buffalo Bill followed by his two companions.

"She has fainted, doctor."

"See to her both of you, while I give those fellows a run for it," shouted Buffalo Bill, and he sped on like the wind.

CHAPTER XV.

THE FIRST VOLUNTEER.

"You're a doctor, Donohue, so your place is here."

"I'll go with the scout," shouted Allan Tremain as he reached the scene of the tragedy.

And he drove his spurs deep into the flanks of his horse in pursuit of Buffalo Bill, who had disappeared a couple of hundred yards away in rapid chase of the Boys in Black.

It was the wish of Dallas Donohue to push on also in pursuit, to go where he supposed there would be an encounter and his good right arm needed, and he momentarily resented the words of his friend.

But then his eyes fell upon the form of the young girl, and near her lay the others, while her dead horse was not far distant, as he saw by its having a side-saddle on.

Then his sympathy was aroused, and leaping from his saddle he threw the rein over the limb of the tree, to which Blanche had fastened her father's horse, and approached the spot where, when the danger was over, the young girl had fallen in a death-like faint.

Kneeling by her side, he felt her pulse, drew off her gloves, and then stepping quickly to his saddle, returned with a leather case of medicines.

It was not very long before, under his efforts to restore her, she showed signs of returning consciousness, and she heard the kindly-spoken words:

"Have no fear, for you are with friends now, and your foes are gone."

She opened her eyes and looked straight into his face, while she obeyed when he said:

"Take a swallow of this, for you need it."

He handed her the cup off his silver flask with brandy in it.

She then spoke asking:

"Who are you?"

"Dallas Donohue, a physician, come to Silver Thread to practice, and anxious to be of service to you, miss."

"Doctor Dallas Donohue!"

"You are the friend of Allan Tremain?" she said quickly.

"Yes, indeed, and he will soon be here."

"I have heard much of you from Allan's letters to his parents and sister, for I am Judge Tremain's ward, Blanche Vassar."

"Ah, Miss Vassar! and I have heard much of you through Allan's letters from home."

"I am delighted, indeed, to meet you, though I regret to find you under the circumstances that I do."

"Alas! far more than you can know, for there lies my poor father, slain by those cruel, cowardly outlaws, from whom you rescued me."

"When they left the reaction came and I swooned away; but I owe so much to you, Doctor Donohue."

"Indeed, you owe me nothing whatever, Miss Vassar, for I am like the fifth wheel of a coach in this affair, for your rescuer is the man who has at long range killed those two black-robed men, and has now gone off in chase of the others, leaving me to care for you, as did Allan Tremain also, for he wished to help the scout."

"To whom do you refer, Doctor Donohue, as the one to whom I am so deeply indebted?" asked Blanche, while her beautiful eyes were filled with tears.

"I refer to the man who was our guide here from the end of the stage-line, and who came to see Judge Tremain, sent by the commandant of the fort, to down the outlaws that have been cursing this valley by their deeds—There, perhaps I have said too much."

"Oh, no, for I knew that Judge Tremain was expecting help from the fort, and how glad am I that it has come, for a company of soldiers will soon put down outlawry here, and avenge the red deeds done."

"A company of soldiers, Miss Vassar, why bless your sweet soul, there is only one man."

"One man?"

"Then there is no hope for us."

"Yes, indeed there is, for that one man is worth a company of soldiers at the work to be done here, and when I tell you that it is Buffalo Bill, you will understand just what he can do."

"Buffalo Bill? I have heard so much of him, yes, he is said to bear a charmed life, and to be a most wonderful man."

"He is all of that. Well, he it was who killed these two men at long range, and he is now chasing the others, while he told Allan Tremain and myself, that he had been sent to run down the outlaws in Silver Thread Valley, and intended to do so, and he will, for I heard him vow to avenge the settlers."

"But he is only one man, Doctor Donohue."

"Oh, yes, but one man who will do as he pledges himself to do."

"But then he intends to raise a company of Volunteer Vigilantes, among the picked men of the settlement, so he told us, and he will then not be alone in the work."

"A company of Volunteer Vigilantes will not be readily found in Silver Thread Valley, Doctor Donohue, after the experience the Vigilantes here have had the past year—Ah! there comes some one."

"It is Buffalo Bill now, and Allan Tremain," and as the two rode up and dismounted, Doctor Donohue introduced them to Blanche, who extended her hand warmly to each and in silence, to then break out suddenly with:

"I am told, sir, that you are to raise a company of Vigilantes to put down outlawry in this valley."

"I have a wrong to avenge and I offer myself as your first volunteer."

CHAPTER XVI.

BUFFALO BILL'S PLEDGE.

THERE was admiration in the glance that Buffalo Bill cast upon Blanche Vassar at her words, offering to be the first volunteer to the band of Vigilantes which the scout was going to organize to put down the outlaws of Silver Thread Valley.

"I accept your services, Miss Vassar, with much pleasure, for if you cannot be one of our active members in the field, you can at least be the Mascot of the Vigilantes," said the scout.

"I thank you, sir, but there is more for me to do than become the good-luck member, as I have a duty to perform in hunting down the murderer of my father and seeing him brought to justice, but I feel that in your hands all will be done that is possible."

"My father I had not seen for years, not

since I was seven years of age, and he left home under a cloud, and my mother died, leaving me alone in the world, save for Judge Tremain, his wife and daughter, who are most dear to me."

"To-day my father was returning to me, and I came upon him suddenly flying from the outlaws, from whom he had escaped."

"Of course I did not know him, nor am I certain that he knew me, but he turned me back from danger, the outlaws fired upon us, and my father received a bullet in his body which soon proved fatal, while my horse was wounded."

"Such, sir, is the story I have to tell, save that the outlaws came on, and their chief, finding out who I was, confessed to me that he knew my father: it was his testimony at my father's trial that blasted his life, though he admitted his testimony was false, and he vowed to make me his captive, laughing at my pleading for mercy over the dead body of my father."

"Do you wonder that I am revengeful, that I tell you I will gladly become one of the members of your Vigilante band?"

"No, Miss Vassar, I do not wonder at your just feeling of revenge."

"And let me say, Mr. Cody, that I, too, offer my services as a volunteer Vigilante of your band, Miss Vassar having put us to shame by setting the example," said Allan Tremain.

"Count me in also as a volunteer, Mr. Cody; for I gladly follow in the wake of Miss Vassar and my friend Tremain," said Doctor Donohue.

"It will not take me long to recruit a company at this rate, I see; but let me explain, Miss Vassar, that I came here for the work of running down the outlaws, and I so told these gentlemen."

"I made known to them the fact that I had determined to organize a secret band of Vigilantes, taking only picked men and not too many."

"Let me explain to you that I came here in partial disguise, I am not to be known as Buffalo Bill, and I wish to remain unknown, save to Judge Tremain and those intimately associated with him."

"I have heard much of this leader of the Boys in Black, as they call themselves, and there is a large price set upon his head, dead or alive, for his crimes."

"No blacker, more cruel and cowardly crime can he have been guilty of than to fire upon you and take your father's life, and I pledge you my word, Miss Vassar, that the Mascot of the Volunteer Vigilantes will avenge your father's death tenfold."

"These gentlemen know well what has been the doom of those who belonged to the Vigilante band in this valley, but that has not deterred them from following your example and becoming volunteers, and it is just what I expected of them though they are new to this country and out here are called tenderfeet; but now let me urge that you ride on with Mr. Tremain and Doctor Donohue, while I remain here on guard until Judge Tremain sends after your father's body, and to bury these two outlaws, and I regret that there are not more but my horse went lame, and so I gave up the chase."

"I will put your saddle and bridle upon one of these horses of the outlaws."

Buffalo Bill hastily did this, and being urged to go on with them, by Allan Tremain and the doctor, Blanche decided to do so and the scout was left alone with the dead.

It was nearly two hours before the rumble of wheels was heard, and Judge Tremain himself came up with an ambulance and several men, to carry the body of Carl Vassar on to his home, and bury the outlaws where they had fallen.

Buffalo Bill saw in the judge a fine-looking gentleman of fifty-five, who greeted him most warmly and said:

"I am glad to meet you, Mr. Cody, and as my old friend Royall could not send me a troop of cavalry, I am glad that he sent me a man who can accomplish more than any one else that I know of in this most deadly work."

"You will ride back with me now, Mr. Cody, and my men will follow more slowly with the ambulance bearing the body of poor Vassar, whose death is a bitter blow to us all, and especially to his noble daughter."

"I have pledged my word to Miss Vassar,

Judge Tremain, to avenge him, yes, and the other victims of the outlaws' merciless deeds of blood, and I shall keep my word, sir, or leave my band of scouts to avenge me, as I know they will," was Buffalo Bill's firm response, as he started with the judge for the ride to Hope Vale Ranch.

CHAPTER XVII.

A MAN WITH A SECRET.

CARL VASSAR was buried from the home of his old friend, Judge Tremain, the man who had sentenced him to die on the gallows years before, though believing him innocent of murdering King Claxton.

The whole settlement knew Blanche Vassar, and learning that her father had been killed by the road-agents in sight of his own home, and just as he was coming to dwell there, the sympathy of all went out to the young girl, and the settlers came from far and near to the funeral.

The miners too had heard the sad news, and came down from the mountains in force, while the ranchers were well represented from beyond the range, and only the death of Judge Tremain or a call to arms could have brought out so many people.

Then, too, there were strangers there, for the young son of Judge Tremain had arrived, just from college, and he was to be the teacher of the valley school.

He had been accompanied by his friend, Doctor Dallas Donohue, for the settlers had asked the judge to write East and get them a Physician, as the only one in the valley was advancing in years, and he wished to give up practice.

But all were impressed with the friend of Judge Tremain who had come to the valley, it was said, to settle there.

He was a Western man, rumor had it, had served in the army and knew wild life well, and wanted to make his home in the settlement.

His striking appearance, genial and courteous manners, added to a certain dignity of mien, impressed all most favorably and all sought to know him, and the two young men who also came in for their share of admiration.

Judge Tremain had introduced his friend as "Captain Cody," and the claim upon the settlement the stranger had would have rendered him popular at once, for young Tremain and Doctor Donohue had told how he had come to their rescue at Trail End City, and had guided them to the valley, which he had known years before when serving in the army.

The ambush prepared for them had been told of also, as well as the fact of having found the settler tied to his horse and placarded with a warning for others, and the four manacled forms lying at Lookout Mound.

To these services rendered by "Captain Cody," was the rescue of Blanche Vassar, and the driving off of the Boys in Black.

"He has said, my friends, that this lawlessness must cease in this valley, that the outlaws must be taught a serious lesson, and we must not be cowed by the fact that they have put to death every one of our Vigilante band organized to hunt them down.

"You have asked me to serve as your chief, but I yield to a better man, one whose record I know, whose worth I appreciate, and I name Captain Cody as the leader of a new band of Vigilantes, for he has already avowed his determination to form one."

So said Judge Tremain, who had called a meeting of the settlers after the funeral of Carl Vassar.

Continuing, he went on to say:

"Captain Cody, moved by the scenes of outlawry he has already seen here, and wishing to avenge our comrades and punish the guilty ones, has already started to raise a company of Vigilantes, and so far he has three members, one of whom is none other than Miss Blanche Vassar, my ward, and who is to be the Mascot of the band.

"He calls only for volunteers, wishes unmarried men alone to join him, and asks for but twenty five all told, a chief, two officers, a surgeon and the fair Mascotte.

"Captain Cody has already arranged for a home in our midst, for he will dwell at

Solace Lodge, as poor Mr. Vassar had written his daughter to name their home.

"Alas! he finds his solace in the grave.

"As this ranch is most central, Doctor Donohue will make his home there for the present, until he can get suited for himself, and there you will find him, and let me say that he comes splendidly recommended as both a physician and surgeon.

"Now, friends, those of the young men who wish to join Captain Cody's band of Volunteer Vigilantes, know where to find him, and he wishes to begin work at once to put a check upon further bloodshed and depredations in our midst.

"Let me further state that the Volunteer Vigilantes will also have an eye upon the Indians—in fact, be at once our scouts and guards.

"Here comes the captain now, so give him a welcome as the Chief of the Vigilantes."

Just then Buffalo Bill, a man with a history, but unknown personally to those of the settlement, and who determined to keep his identity a secret as long as he could, rode up to join Judge Tremain, and the welcoming cheers that greeted him were a surprise, and caused him, while raising his hat and bowing his thanks, to blush like a school-girl at the honor done him.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN UNLOOKED-FOR ALLY.

"Ah! and Indians, too?"

So said Buffalo Bill, as he was scouting along the range overlooking the Silver Thread, making himself familiar with the old scenes he had known years before when scouting there.

He had been one week only in his new home, and had taken possession of Solace Lodge, the home of Carl Vassar, which had been completed just in time.

It was supposed in the settlement that he had bought the ranch from Blanche, as her father had been killed, and the idea was to let the settlers so believe who were not in the secret, for if it got out that Buffalo Bill was in the valley and had come to hunt down the outlaws, the chance to capture them would be destroyed, as it could not but be thought that he was backed by some secret force.

Judge Tremain had stocked the ranch with cattle and horses for Mr. Vassar, and so the cowboys on the place were simply told to transfer their allegiance to Captain Cody, the new master, and they did.

Doctor Donohue had taken up his quarters there at Buffalo Bill's request, and the two friends were getting along splendidly together, the young physician being kephthuv, for nearly every settler's family seemed to suddenly develop an ache or a fever just to test the skill of the new physician.

The band of Volunteer Vigilantes had been raised the very first day, in fact, twice as many men could have been secured, but Buffalo Bill stuck to his original intention of twenty-five all told, organizing another band however as a reserve force to draw upon, as he said, significantly:

"We will need others to call upon to supply the places of those made vacant by death."

Carter Kent, a young settler, had been made first lieutenant of the band, and, out of courtesy to his father, Allan Tremain was appointed second lieutenant, with Doctor Donohue as surgeon, and Blanche Vassar as mascotte and color-bearer, for she had at once embroidered them a fighting flag, a rather ghastly one with a red hand holding scales of justice, with the words:

"RETRIBUTIVE JUSTICE."

Beneath was the lettering in silver thread:

"VOLUNTEER VIGILANTES."

"You must fight the Boys in Black under a flag of their own color," grimly said Blanche as she gave the colors to Buffalo Bill and recalled the dead father who had died by her side and remembered the words of the outlaw chief to her, how he had blackened that father's name and nearly sent him to the gallows, while he had also been merciless to her.

To Judge Tremain she had told all, and to

Buffalo Bill, what the outlaw had said, and among Carl Vassar's papers had been found the proofs, sworn statements of two jurymen, that they had been bribed to find him guilty.

Buffalo Bill had been delighted with his band of Volunteers, and found them to be a splendid lot of young fellows, magnificent riders, dead shots, men who could handle a lasso, follow a trail, and not one of whom stood less than six feet in his stockings.

"They are a band of heroes," the scout captain had said as he gazed at them sitting on their horses before him, clad in buckskin, wearing large sombreros and armed to the teeth.

He had originated a series of signals, by which he could call them together in a short while, and giving them their orders, had started alone upon his reconnoitering expeditions to see just what he could find out about the outlaws, their haunts and their members.

It was while scouting along the range that he suddenly came upon a sight which caused him to quickly dismount and creep to a ridge, over which he looked with his glass to his eyes.

What he saw was a white man in a canyon engaged in fishing, while toward him, trying to get near enough to kill him, were three Indians, while half a dozen more were beyond the ridge holding the ponies of their comrades who had gone to get the scalp of the pale-face.

"It may be a settler, it may be a road-agent, but I will chip in and save him.

"If he is a road-agent, I will have saved his life and have to take it later.

"It is a long-range shot, but I can make it," and so saying Buffalo Bill brought his rifle around, took quick aim, touched the trigger, and the red-skin nearest the white man, and who was leaning over a rock to shoot him in the back, leaped into the air and fell headlong over the ridge within a couple of hundred feet of his intended victim.

As the other two sprang to their feet, Buffalo Bill fired a second time, and again an Indian went down while the third ran like a deer to rejoin his comrades.

Again the rifle cracked, and the scout saw the Indian leap into the air, then fall, but he sprang to his feet and ran on.

Again he pulled the trigger of his repeating rifle, and the bullet knocked up the dust at his feet.

Another shot must have clipped him from the way he jumped, but he gained the ridge, darted over and reaching his pony the party dashed away, the scout sending shot after shot flying in chase of them.

"Ho, pard, do I owe my life to you?"

Buffalo Bill turned and beheld standing near him a man over six feet in height, and of massive frame.

His hair and beard were long and were as white as snow, while he was attired in a combination suit of buckskin and mountain-lionskin.

He had a rifle of ancient date in his hand and a belt of arms was about his waist, his hat being made of a wolf's skin.

One glance at him and Buffalo Bill called out: "Great Scott! is it you, Nemesis Nat? I thought you were dead years ago?"

"You bet I hain't dead, Buffalo Bill, and darned glad am I to see you, while this hain't the first time I owe you my life.

"God bless you, pard, you thought I was dead, did ye?"

"No, no, I followed the Navahoes westward, you know, for I'm still gathering scalps, as you know what they done to me and mine.

"I'll just rope in them you has got for me to add to my string, for I know you never takes Injun hair," and the venerable-looking old avenger walked over to the two Indians and scalped them with a dexterity that showed long practice.

"Now, Bill, come right home with me, for I has a cave-ranch a few miles from here, and I wants ter entertain yer.

"I has a string of fish and plenty of game at home, so come right along, as I has something to tell you," and Buffalo Bill mounted his horse, for the old man was a most rapid walker and a tireless one, and followed him for several miles, until he passed up to the head of a canyon.

"There's grass for the pony, Bill, so stake

him out while I set dinner a going, and then come into the cave—watch me and see how I go."

Buffalo Bill obeyed, saw the old man climb up the rocks and disappear fifty feet above in a clump of *pinons*.

He soon followed and found himself in a large, dry cavern, of which the old man had made a home.

There was a fire there, and dinner was cooking—a buffalo rib roast, some fish, hoe-cake and coffee.

Upon the rocky walls hung a saddle and bridle, a pair of revolvers and numberless weapons, taken from red-skins, while a buffalo robe in one corner and some blankets formed the couch of the strange man.

"Sit right there on that rock, and we'll soon have dinner," said Nemesis Nat, and in a short while dinner was ready and the two men, so strangely met, sat talking over the past when they had known each other, until at last Nemesis Nat said:

"I tell you, Buffalo Bill, that there is a secret in these mountains you would give your scalp to know."

CHAPTER XIX.

NEMESIS NAT.

"Yes, Bill, I hain't forgot yer, and never will," resumed the old man, going back to his remembrance of the scout quickly, as though he thought he had said too much in referring to a secret of those mountains that Buffalo Bill would give his scalp to know.

"Nor have I forgotten you, Nemesis Nat," answered the scout.

"But you hain't got the same reason for remembering me that I has you, for I remember how you saved me from the Vigilantes on the Platte, who were going to hang me as a suspicious character, and yet the very men sitting in judgment upon me were cut-throats and fugitives from justice.

"I remember again when you tackled the three Sioux who had me prisoner and rescued me, saving me from being roasted alive.

"But, Pard Bill, I am no fugitive from justice. I did not come West with a crime upon my head and have to hide from the gallows.

"It may not look so to you now, but I was a gentleman once, yes, I was a minister of the Gospel and had a happy home, a wife and children.

"I had some money, too, so gave my salary to the poor of the congregation, serving them from a desire to do good.

"But all was changed in a night, Bill, for a fine young stranger who had come to our town, and played the organ in my church, ran off with my beautiful daughter, the eldest of the family.

"She was sixteen then, and that was a cruel blow, for those I had preached morality and resistance to temptation to pointed to my child, for the man she had gone away with was married, and it was found that he had urged her to take a thousand dollars of church money I had in the safe in the vestry-room, along with some rare old jewels belonging to her mother and worth a small fortune.

"I was reviled by those I had taught, the shame of her act was put upon me, my usefulness was gone, and so wife and I determined to pull up stakes and come where we were not known to any one.

"Well, Bill, I am telling you the same old story of many an unfortunate settler, for one night when we had a lovely home, and all was going well with us, my four children were happy and I was educating them along with the other little ones of the settlement, the Navahoes swept down upon us.

"My wife was killed, my children, too, before my eyes, and I was badly wounded, scalped and left for dead—see, the scar yet remains here, but it is felt more here," and as he spoke he first showed among his thick, massy locks where the scalp-lock had been torn from his head, and then pressed his hand over his heart to reveal where the hurt was deepest.

"My home was burned, too, Bill, and I saw the bodies of my loved ones cast into the flames.

"I could do nothing, and prayed that I, too, might die.

"But my prayer was unanswered, and

then suddenly there came over me a longing to live—to live to avenge the deed.

"I had not preached a sermon since my daughter went away, and I tell you that curses came to my lips where prayers had been uttered.

"How I got well I never knew; but I rallied and in time took the trail, going first as a scout at Fort Whipple.

"Then I took to the wilderness and began to avenge my wrongs upon the red-skins, and you met me about that time.

"I lived for revenge, and the soldiers and miners called me Nemesis Nat, and I suppose I deserved the name; I know that I do now for I am only an avenger—I live for revenge.

"See, this cavern is my home, Buffalo Bill, and I am comfortable here, and you are the only one who knows where I dwell.

"I have money, plenty of gold hidden away, for the red-skins did not get that, and when I need provisions and ammunition I go to the nearest fort or settlement.

"I am a back number, but I keep up with the most improved weapons, for I need them, Bill, in my business, for my mission now is to kill, to add to my string of scalps.

"I show you my record," and he arose and took down an appallingly long string of Navaho scalps, and remarked:

"They were all there—at the killing and cremation of my loved ones."

CHAPTER XX.

THE UNTOLD SECRET.

BUFFALO BILL had listened with deepest interest to the strange and pitiful story of old Nemesis Nat.

He felt that grief, not age, had turned his hair and beard to a snowy hue, for he was scarcely over fifty-five or six, and as strong and athletic as though twenty years younger.

He had, indeed, had a sad life, and the scout could not blame him for having become a Nemesis.

He lived alone with his sorrow, and was a monomaniac upon the subject of scalp-taking.

In a different life memories of the cruel past would have driven him mad.

At last the scout said in a sympathetic tone:

"You always had my sympathy, Nemesis Nat, and I am glad that you told me your story.

"I am glad that you brought me here with you, for I feel that we can be pals and help one another, and I have something to tell you too; but I shall hope to see you in better quarters some day, and leading a different life."

"No, no, Bill, there is no other life for me to lead.

"I am an outcast, a rover of mountain and plain, a dweller away from my fellow-men, and my life is devoted to avenging my loved ones.

"Feeling as I do now, I would be glad to hunt down the man who destroyed the honor of my name and brought shame upon my beautiful child, the idol of our hearts and home.

"I would have done so, would have dogged him to justice, only her pitiful letter told us that she loved him and for harm to befall him meant death to her."

"And have you never heard from her?"

"No."

"And do not know whether she is dead or alive?"

"I hope that she is dead, and God rest her soul and forgive her."

"Well, Nemesis Nat, let me tell you that I am here in the valley on a special mission, though you must keep the secret, as it is known only to a few interested ones."

"Who is there for me to tell it to, Bill, even did I care to betray you?"

"I spoke in a general way, Nemesis Nat, and I'll tell you what my mission is, and you can help me in it."

"I will do all in my power."

"It is to run down the outlaws known as the Boys in Black."

Buffalo Bill's keen eyes saw the man give a start at his words, and a sudden look of anxiety cross his face, but not appearing to notice it, he continued:

"You have heard of these outlaws, of course?"

"Oh yes."

"Well, their deeds have been so vile that I decided to come to this valley and see what could be done to free the settlers from the curse upon them," and the start and look he had seen made Buffalo Bill cautious now.

"And you intend to hunt them down?"

"I hope to do so."

"They are bad men."

"Yes, there never have been worse outlaws banded together on this frontier."

"Have you proof of this, Bill?"

"Yes, I have."

"What proof?"

"The proof of my own eyesight of what they have done."

"That should be the best of proof."

"But tell me of them."

Buffalo Bill told of the crimes of the Boys in Black, the long list of their red and cruel deeds, up to the killing of the last of the settler Vigilantes, the murder of Carl Vassar and the capture of his daughter.

The man listened with deepest attention to all, a pained look upon his face, and at last said:

"I would as soon doubt my hatred for red-skins, Buffalo Bill, as your word; but this is a red list against the Boys in Black."

"Yes, and do you not think it is time they should be wiped out?"

"Yes."

"And you will be my ally, Nemesis Nat, will help me?"

"Bill, let me tell you something?"

"Yes."

"I know these Boys in Black, know their chief and their haunts."

"But I did not suspect them of being what you claim they are, for they have kept their red deeds hidden from me, and I only supposed that they held up wagon-trains, coaches, and robbed men of gold, not of life, and I had no means of knowing to the contrary, though when last at the fort for supplies I did hear hard stories told of their acts, but supposed all was over-painted."

"Now, Bill, you ask me to help you hunt them down, and I could do so, but let me tell you that they have been my friends, and they believe that I am theirs."

"I was wounded in a fight with Indians once, and they carried me to their retreat and cared for me most tenderly for months, while one of their number, a physician he had been, saved my life."

"Again, when a captive to the Navahoes, and about to be tortured to death, their chief, who is an ally of the red-skins, demanded my release and secured it."

"The outlaws are masked, Bill, but I have seen the faces of all of them, and some strange magnetism draws me to their chief."

"They trust me and I will not betray them; but I shall not betray you either, I shall be neutral, yes, more, for they are evil, you are good, and I shall protect you when I can from them."

"The secret of their retreat and trails I will not tell, but I will protect you."

"More I cannot, will not do, Bill."

CHAPTER XXI.

A STRANGE SIGHT

THERE was no doubt in the mind of Buffalo Bill but that Nemesis Nat had told him the whole truth about the road-agents.

He felt assured that the old man felt bound to them by ties which would not allow him to betray them.

A man of honor, he yet could not uphold their acts, or take sides with them; but yet he would not, owing them all that he did of gratitude, betray them, forfeit their confidence in him in having taken him to their secret retreats.

The scout realized just how the old avenger was situated, how he felt about it, and he would not urge him to aid him.

But he was sure that the outlaws would not be informed of his intending to hunt them down, that they would not be warned that Buffalo Bill was upon their trail, while if he could save his the scout's life, there was no doubt but what he would do so.

Nemesis Nat intended to remain neutral, as he had said, with a leaning toward aiding the scout, and with this Buffalo Bill must be satisfied, he felt.

"Can you conscientiously, Nemesis Nat,

give me any particulars regarding these road-agents?"

"Ask what you wish, Bill, and I will answer as I deem just to both sides."

"How many men are in the band?"

"All of seventy-five, but they are scattered, and, being on friendly terms with the Indians, they are strong in that, where they can retreat for safety to the camps of the red skins."

"They have their secret retreat, though?"

"They have their secret camps."

"And are under the leadership of a man who is a very capable commander?"

"Oh, yes; I consider him a very remarkable man."

"He has the power of life or death over his men, and has iron-clad laws for them to follow, allowing no deviation from them."

"Will you describe him to me?"

"No, for you are liable to meet him at any time, and he is one to recognize from a description."

"Why do they go masked?"

"To avoid being seen in an attack, and recognized afterward, when the recognition might be fatal."

"Why dress in black?"

"It is a fad with them, as is also their riding black horses."

"The Boys in Blue, the soldiers, were at one time their most earnest foes, and they simply took the name of Boys in Black, though they do not commit their lawless acts now near a fort or post."

"Who are they mostly?"

"Mostly, I should say, men driven to seek safety by coming West, for crimes they have been guilty of."

"Some have been cattle men, others miners, a few settlers, and still more the hangers-on about camps, a deserter or two from the army, and, in fact, men of all degrees of crime and occupation."

"They are cunning as Indians, well armed and splendidly mounted, and from what you tell me of them, and I regret to hear, they are a cruel and merciless lot who deserve capture and punishment, though I will do nothing to bring it upon them, yet, as I said, I will do nothing to protect them, because they are lawless, and everything to protect you, as you represent right and justice."

"Can I say more, Bill?"

"Indeed you cannot, Nemesis Nat, and I thank you, while I will also place confidence in you."

"I am in this work to stay, and I tell you frankly I shall run these outlaws down, some of them to death by bullet, others to die at the rope end, and more to suffer punishment by imprisonment for their evil deeds."

"I shall show them no mercy, and heart, hand and life I am in the cause to stay to the end of the trail."

"Now I must be off, for I have made you a long visit, but I am going to tell you where you can find me, and we must be good friends, Nemesis Nat, while I shall expect one thing of you, and that is, that where you know that the innocent are going to suffer at the hands of these fiends, you will at least give me a warning that will prevent death and ruin which one word from you could have averted."

"I will promise this, Bill," answered Nemesis Nat and he went with Buffalo Bill to his horse.

Mounting, Buffalo Bill rode on his way, and returning later by the trail which he had seen the Indians on, he came upon a strange scene, for there stood Nemesis Nat at the head of an open grave in which were the bodies of the two red-skins, while in his deep voice he was repeating over them the service for the dead.

"I intended to bury them myself, but he has done so—what a strange man," and Buffalo Bill rode on unseen by Nemesis Nat in his humane act to the dead Indians.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE LASSO-TROWER.

BUFFALO BILL was much impressed with his long interview with the man whose life was that of an avenger.

"I am glad that I saved his life, and I have discovered much by my talk with him."

"He will do as he says in my behalf, but

nothing could make him betray the outlaws, after the debt of gratitude he owes them."

"He is as true as steel to friend or foe."

"This trail will lead me by the house of Judge Tremain, so I will return that way," and Buffalo Bill turned off of the trail he had been following, into one that branched off to the right.

He was within a mile of the home of Judge Tremain, when he suddenly reined his horse to a halt.

It was just on the summit of a ridge, and he forced his horse back over it, as his eyes fell upon a scene of deep interest for him.

The burying-ground of the valley was a most picturesque spot, a meadow under a massive rock that towered aloft like a mighty monument.

It was on the banks of the Silver Thread, and there was a natural grove there.

Here had been buried the dead of the settlement, and there were a number of new graves that marked the last resting-place of those who had been victims of the Boys in Black.

One grave there was apart from the others, and this was where Carl Vassar had been buried.

Each day since his death Blanche had gathered wild flowers, and riding the three miles that lay between Hope Vale Ranch and the burying-ground, had gone to his grave.

It was Blanche that Buffalo Bill now saw, and she was spreading flowers upon the grave, while her horse cropped grass near her.

All unconscious that there was a human being within two miles of her, Blanche was wrapped up in her work of love.

But there was one near who saw that danger threatened her.

A horseman had come slowly along the trail toward the burying-ground and halted in the shadow of Monument Rock, where he had dismounted.

What Buffalo Bill saw from the ridge was this man leave his horse, and, with lasso in hand, creep cautiously toward the spot where Blanche knelt, shielding himself as well as he could by intervening trees.

The scout was within very easy range of his rifle, but he did not think of using it, as he said:

"I must catch that fellow alive."

He could have called out to Blanche of her danger, could have ridden over the ridge and put the man to flight; but his horse had had a long ride and was tired, and he was not sure of overtaking the man upon the animal he then had.

Then, too, night was not very far distant, and the man might elude him in the darkness.

So Buffalo Bill decided to dash around the ridge, descend to the meadow, and await the man by Monument Rock when he came there with his captive, for he was sure that he intended to kidnap Blanche, as he recalled the threat she said the chief of the Boys in Black had made to her.

So Buffalo Bill rode rapidly along the ridge out of sight, until he came to a water-wash leading down to the meadow, and in five minutes more he had concealed his horse in a pine thicket and was standing by the side of the animal of the man he had seen.

It did not take him but a minute more to find cover behind a bowlder, and unswinging his lasso he crouched down ready to throw it at the time when it was needed, muttering to himself:

"I'll give him a dose of his own poison."

In the mean while the man had glided over the quarter of a mile that lay between the spot where he had left his horse and where Blanche was, all unconscious of her danger in the sad memories that crowded upon her.

She had placed the fresh wild flowers upon the grave, and was kneeling with bowed head, and her hands clasped, while nearer and nearer crept the man as stealthily as a coyote.

"Oh, if he could have only lived, how happy would we have been in our home!" she murmured.

As the words left her lips there was a "swish" in the air, a blow, and the lariat had coiled about her and drawn taut, pinning her arms to her sides, while, springing to her feet, she was dragged to the ground again with a heavy fall.

CHAPTER XXIII.

UNLOOKED-FOR AID.

IN vain did Blanche seek to free her arms, and strive to grasp a revolver she had carried in her belt since her last adventure.

The man who had caught her in the toils was an expert hand with a lariat and quickly had it coiled about her beyond all resistance.

"What do you mean by this outrage?" she cried, indignantly, as he took the revolver from her belt and then secured her beyond all resistance.

"Keep that pretty mouth of yours closed, miss, or I'll have to use a gag on you, for my kind are not popular in this settlement, and though folks is few and far between, the yell of a lovely gal can be heard a long way off."

"I'll keep quiet if you do not gag me."

"But why have you made me a prisoner?" she said appealingly.

She saw before her an athletic, wiry fellow, dressed as a miner, and with top-boots and a slouch hat.

His face was bearded, cruel in expression, and Blanche required but one glance into it to feel that she would appeal in vain for mercy to that man.

But it struck her that she might appeal to his love of gain, and what he would not do from a sense of mercy, he might do for gold.

So she said, quietly:

"Why do you not answer me?"

"What do you mean by this outrage?"

"I am not acting for myself, miss, but for another."

"Ah! you have a master, then, whom you commit crime for?"

"Don't put it that way, for I have no master."

"Then you are paid for your work?"

"You bet I am!"

"Who is your master?"

"I said I don't like the name of master."

"All right, who hires you for this work?"

"You'll know, I guess, sooner than you wish."

"Where is he?"

"Up in the mountains."

"It is the man who killed my father, at whose grave you have committed this crime, as he did over his dead body."

"It is the vile chief of the band of outlaws known as the Boys in Black?"

"You guesses well."

"How much does he pay you for your work?" quietly asked Blanche.

"Big money."

"What do you call big money?"

"A cool thousand dollars."

"Then you commit crime for pay?"

"About that."

"And you are for sale to the highest bidder?"

"That depends."

"Upon what?"

"How big the sum is that is offered."

"Suppose I offer you fifteen hundred dollars if you will release me?"

"Have you got your money with you?"

"No, of course not."

"How could you pay it?"

"I suppose you know who I am?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Miss Vassar."

"That is your father in that grave you were putting flowers on."

"I was with the chief the day he killed him and caught you, and we were run off by a gang of settlers."

"Then, as you know me, you must be aware that if I promise you fifteen hundred dollars I am able to pay it."

"Seeing is believing."

"You doubt me?"

"I want the money, and you have not got it with you."

"I will pledge you my word to meet you here at this time to-morrow and give you the money, for I have it, gold my father had with him when he came from Mexico."

"And which we missed?"

"Yes."

"Well, I can't take your word, miss, though no doubt you mean what you say."

"I've got you and you must go with me, so I'll get your horse and bring him here for you to mount."

"If you will trust me I will give you two thousand dollars in gold."

"If you had the money with you, miss, I'd take it and light out quickly, for it would never do to let the chief know I sold myself."

"No, you must go with me."

He walked over to where her horse was feeding near Monument Rock, and catching the animal led it back to where he had left her.

But as he drew near to where Blanche stood, the picture of despair, a horseman suddenly dashed out of a *pinon* thicket behind the young girl, there was the crack of a revolver and the self-confessed outlaw dropped in his tracks.

But it was not Buffalo Bill who had fired the shot.

It was the Mysterious Man in Blue.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE RESCUER.

It was a glad cry that broke from the lips of Blanche Vassar, as she stood there by the grave of her father, the lariat of her captor wrapped closely around her, when suddenly there dashed into view a horseman, one who came to her rescue.

She turned at the rapid clatter of hoofs just in time to see him level his revolver and pull trigger.

She saw the kidnapper leap into the air and fall heavily upon his face, as though killed on the instant.

She had heard of the Mysterious Man in Blue, and the one she now beheld before her she was certain was no other than he.

She saw a splendid horse, with Mexican saddle and bridle, richly ornamented with silver, and a lariat hanging from the horn.

The rider riveted her gaze and commanded her admiration in spite of herself.

The rider was the same handsome, debonaire Man in Blue who had come to the rescue of Buffalo Bill, Doctor Donohue and Allan Tremain in Trail End City, and whose word had been law to the wild element under the leadership of the Giant Sport, Circus Sam.

He sprang from his saddle, and, with sombrero in hand, his long, golden hair hanging in wavy masses upon his shoulders, he approached Blanche, his blue costume even more elegant than the one he had worn at Trail End City.

"I am sorry to find you in trouble, lady, and will quickly release you from those bonds," he said, in his low voice, full of melody.

"You have saved me, sir, from one whom that man was the tool of, the chief of the outlaws known as the Boys in Black, and without my expressing my gratitude, you can feel how much I appreciate your act and the risk you took on my account."

"Do not speak of it, lady, for a man who would not risk his life for a lady is a despicable thing indeed."

And the Man in Blue was quickly unwrapping the coils of the lasso from about the form of Blanche, who said:

"You are he whom they call the Mysterious Man in Blue, are you not?"

"Yes; but my name is Ford Belfont, miss."

"You recognize me by my clothing, I suppose, as the most distinguishing feature?"

"I have heard of you, sir, and of your costume, which is certainly picturesque, if odd."

"Thanks. I have a fancy for blue and silver, and humor myself in it."

"You are Miss Blanche Vassar, I take it?"

"And may I ask how you recognized me, sir? for I do not recall that we have met before."

"By your beauty, which has not been misrepresented," was the frank response, and yet so respectfully said that Blanche could not feel offended, but blushed visibly, while she said:

"When you see my adopted sister, Myrtle Tremain, you will see one who is indeed beautiful, and may I not ask you to escort me to Hope Vale Ranch, that you may tell Judge Tremain of the tragedy here, for he is dead, is he not?"

And Blanche glanced timidly toward the outlaw lying some paces distant, just as he had fallen.

Without appearing to hear her last remark, he said:

"Yes, Miss Tremain is very beautiful, for I saw her once; but she is a blonde, and being one myself, I like the opposite type of beauty."

"Yes, this man is dead, for I shot to kill, and I will escort you home with pleasure, Miss Vassar, as it is growing late, and you should not ride alone."

"Permit me to help you to your saddle."

He led her horse up and with courtly grace aided her to mount, when, leaping into his own saddle without using the stirrup, they turned toward the ranch of Judge Tremain, Blanche remarking:

"Must he be left there?"

"Oh yes, I'll see to having him buried upon my return, for my ranch is just beyond the range a few miles."

"I heard that you had a home in Silver Thread."

"Yes, I have several homes, for I am a roving gold-hunter, Miss Vassar, seeking my fortune where I can find it," and they rode on in a rapid gallop.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE SCOUT SURPRISED.

BUFFALO BILL waited patiently for the coming of the outlaw to his horse, accompanied by his captive.

But, as half an hour passed and the man did not appear, for he should have been there, certainly having had ample time to capture the maiden and bring her there, Buffalo Bill began to grow anxious.

What the delay meant he could not understand, and he at last decided to reconnoiter, when suddenly he saw the man come into view.

He was walking rapidly along and going straight toward his horse.

Then the right arm of the scout began to move in a circle, the lasso-coil grasped in his unerring hand, while his face grew stern as he wondered what had become of the maiden.

Had the outlaw killed her?

Had she escaped?

With doubt as to her fate, he gave the lasso its last whirl and sent it flying toward the man.

It was aimed as straight as a bullet, and the noose settled down over the man's head, there was a hard and quick pull, and down went the outlaw his full length upon the ground, and with force enough to half stun him.

Before he could realize what had happened, or rise to his feet, the tall form of the scout bent over him and a revolver muzzle was thrust into his face, while he heard the words:

"I want you."

"Lordy! who is you?"

"One who carries a rope especially to hang just such villains as you."

"Are you a road-agent?" gasped the man.

"Oh, no, but you are."

"Me! don't you believe it."

"I know it."

"No yer don't, for I am a honest man."

"Your face belies you, then."

"Come, I want those weapons!"

And the scout unlinked the belt-of-arms and tossed them to one side, while the man asked, anxiously:

"What do you mean, pard?"

"To give you a little of your own medicine, now I have got you caught."

"I don't understand."

"If you are a road-agent, you miss it in expecting to find I've got money."

The scout laughed and replied:

"Don't fool yourself. I've got the right man the one I want, for you've got your sign under your shirt, I see, and your mask hangs on your saddle yonder, my Boy in Black."

The man turned very pale at the words of the scout, and an ugly look came into his eyes as though he felt he was in a desperate situation and meant to make a bold attempt to try conclusions with his captor, who was binding him securely with his lasso.

One effort quickly made to free himself was enough, however, as he was hurled to the ground with a strength that amazed him, and he wished no more.

"Now I've got you secure, tell me what

about that young lady you were sneaking upon to catch with your lasso?"

Again the man's face turned livid, and he remained silent.

"You heard me, so answer."

"Then you saw me?"

"Yes."

"And was layin' for me to come back to my horse?"

"I was."

"Well, she's gone."

"Where?"

"Home."

"You didn't catch her, then?"

"You bet I did, for if you saw me, I won't lie."

"I saw you, and I wish to know what has become of her."

"Gone home."

"She escaped from you, then?"

"Well, she got away, but not from any act of her own."

"What do you mean?"

"She was rescued."

"By whom?"

"Has you ever heard tell o' a Man in Blue?"

"I have heard of him often, and once met him; in fact, he rendered me good service a short while ago."

"He's the man."

"That rescued Miss Vassar?"

"Yes."

"Where was he?"

"Lord knows; but he came dashing out of a thicket, and fired at me with his revolver."

"I didn't stop the bullet, but I knows when I has got enough, and I jist tumbled down all in a heap, and played dead 'poscadence."

"It went, and he rescued the girl and rode off with her, and I came back after my horse."

"Well, I am glad no harm befell her; but why did you seek to capture her?"

"For ransom money."

"All right; I want you, and so you go with me."

"Come, I'll help you mount, and then I'll take you face to face with Miss Vassar and see what she says."

And soon after the scout and his prisoner started at a canter for Hope Vale Ranch.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MAKING FRIENDS.

THERE was something about the Man in Blue that was very fascinating.

He certainly was exceedingly handsome, he possessed a slender yet fine physique, he rode with a grace and confidence that showed the perfect horseman, while his manners were courtly, he was intelligent, refined, and spoke in a low tone with a voice that was peculiarly rich and of an almost pathetic cadence.

He seemed to drop the affair at the graveyard, as he rode along and talked of matters wholly foreign to the surroundings.

Once he spoke of himself, and then only to say:

"I dislike city life, but love the wild career one leads out here in the midst of danger and living with nature all about you; none of man's artificial work."

"I enjoy the hunt for gold, and though I have struck it rich, as they say here, I still keep on in my search."

"One out here hears such strange stories, we hardly know what to believe, and I am glad to be able to see for myself just what you are," said Blanche.

"Then you have heard my picture drawn in all shades and colors, I suppose?" he remarked with a smile.

"Oh, yes, I have heard it said that you were a woman in disguise; again that you were a Government detective looking up criminals, that you were a gambler, a desperado, a fugitive from justice, in fact all that one can be, and now I find you—"

"What?"

He asked the question abruptly, as Blanche paused; but, though she flushed slightly she replied pleasantly:

"Well, I will admit that the horns and cloven hoofs are missing in your make-up, and if you are not what you seem you certainly play the part of gentleman well."

"Thanks, Miss Vassar."

"Oh, don't thank me, for I am only getting

square for the compliment you paid me awhile since; but there comes Myrtle and her brother after me, doubtless alarmed by my long stay."

As she spoke Allan Tremain and Myrtle came in sight, riding rapidly toward them.

Myrtle was indeed a beautiful girl, with dreamy blue eyes, the longest of black lashes shading them, a wealth of gold brown hair and an elegant form.

Allan had discarded his derby hat for a slouch, and his attire of the tenderfoot for a pair of buckskin leggings, top-boots and a *neglige* shirt, while about his waist was a belt of arms, and a repeating-rifle hung at his saddle-horn.

They seemed surprised at finding Blanche with company, but Allan Tremain recognized the Man in Blue at a glance, and called out:

"Ah, Mr. Belfont, we meet again, and where I have the pleasure of making you our guest, for you will of course go on to Hope Vale with us—but permit me to present you to my sister."

The blue silver-embroidered sombrero was doffed, revealing the golden, wavy hair, as the Man in Blue bent low at the introduction, while Myrtle extended her hand and said:

"I am glad to meet you, Mr. Belfont, for my brother has told us of your kind service at Trail End City, and we owe you renewed thanks now, for bringing home this runaway."

"It was my pleasure, Miss Tremain, to serve as an escort."

"Ah! much more than that, Mr. Belfont, for you were my rescuer," and Blanche hastily told the story of her adventure, while the Man in Blue said:

"I had started over to the store in the valley, but found that I had left some letters I wished to mail, so decided to return to my ranch and come back to-morrow."

"I took the trail by the burying-ground through some intuition of good luck in store for me, and came upon Miss Vassar in trouble."

"That is all there is of it."

"The man you killed would not hold that opinion, could he speak for himself, Mr. Belfont," said Allan Tremain, and then he added:

"But father and mother were anxious about you, Blanche, and we came in search of you."

"You must go on with us to Hope Vale, Mr. Belfont."

"Certainly, we can take no refusal," Myrtle said, while Blanche added:

"You promised to escort me home, Mr. Belfont, and I will hold you to the compact."

"Thus urged, I cannot refuse, especially as I wish to see Judge Tremain and report to him the killing of the outlaw, and as I will take back to my ranch and have my men bury him, there will be no need of a coroner's inquest," and dropping back to the side of Myrtle as her escort, the party continued on at a rapid gallop to the Tremain Ranch, the Man in Blue having won favor with his new-found friends.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A STARTLING RECOGNITION.

THE stories told of the Man in Blue had not impressed Judge Tremain favorably toward him, until his son and Doctor Donohue had reported the affair in the Last Chance Lay-out in Trail End City.

The fact was that when there was any one particularly marked upon the frontier, all kinds of tales went the rounds about him, and the judge had leaned toward believing some things he heard of the Mysterious Man in Blue, and it was a regret to him when he heard that he had established himself on a ranch over beyond the range.

He had been told that the Man in Blue was a man killer, and there were too many reckless characters then in the settlement to look with favor upon another one coming to settle there, and one who affected such a remarkable costume as did Ford Belfont.

What his son had told him of the Man in Blue had however changed his opinion in a measure, and yet he did not seem pleased with beholding the stranger returning home with his daughter, son and Blanche.

The cabin of the Tremains was a very

large one, three commodious rooms being on each side of a hall twenty feet wide by fifty in depth.

There were wings on each side, and a large kitchen in the rear, for the judge was wont to say that with thousands of acres of land about him he wished to have a home that was large enough to extend hospitality when there was a wish to do so.

The judge had brought with him a family of negro servants, reared on the Maryland plantation where he was born, and old "Aunt Kittie" was a cook to make one's heart glad, while her husband, "Uncle Toby," had served as butler since he was of age, and knew just how things were liked in the Tremain household, though it was a frontier home.

Mrs. Tremain was a woman wrapped up in her family and her home, and if ever she had a regret for the change, a longing for the luxuries of her past, she never expressed it in word or look.

The two, the judge and his wife were seated upon the broad piazza of their home when they saw the party of four coming on at a gallop, and Mrs. Tremain said:

"They have found Blanche, and some one else is with them."

"Yes, wife, and it can be none other than the Man in Blue, for he is dressed like a Mexican dandy, and no one else rigs up that way."

"I wonder where they met him, husband?"

"Allan knows him, you remember, and they have met him on the trail and picked him up for supper, I guess; but I would rather not have to entertain such picturesque strangers."

But Judge Tremain was the soul of hospitality, and advanced to meet the party as they dismounted, and shook hands with the Man in Blue when Allan presented him, in his turn introducing him to his wife and remarking:

"Mr. Belfont will of course be our guest for the night, wife."

"Thank you, no, Judge Tremain, for I must return to night to my ranch," was the answer, and then Blanche explained her meeting with Mr. Belfont and the great debt of gratitude she was under to him.

Mrs. Tremain turned pale and said:

"Oh, Blanche, what danger do you not run into, and how grateful we should all be to Mr. Belfont for his rescue of you."

The ladies then retired to prepare for supper, leaving the judge, Allan and their guest upon the piazza, talking over the attack of the outlaw upon Blanche, the former remarking:

"You left him where he fell, Mr. Belfont?"

"Yes, Judge Tremain; I did not even approach him."

"Are you sure that he was dead?"

"No more than that I fired to kill, sir, and I have the reputation of being a dead shot," was the modest reply.

"Well, my son will return with you, as you say you must go back to-night, and I will send men along to bury the body. Ah! who is that coming, Allan, for my sight is not what it once was?"

"It is Captain Cody, sir, and he has some one with him."

"I am glad, for they will be in time for supper—do you recognize the one with him, Mr. Belfont?" asked the judge, as he saw the Man in Blue rise quickly and gaze toward the two horsemen.

"I do recognize the men, sir, one being your champion at Trail End City, Mr. Tremain, and the other the man I supposed was dead—the kidnapper of Miss Vassar."

"I do not understand it, gentlemen," and the Man in Blue seemed in a quandary as to what the appearance of the supposed dead man could mean.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

FOES, BUT NEVER FRIENDS.

THE judge was fairly startled, as was the Man in Blue, and Allan Tremain looked really bewildered at the appearance with Buffalo Bill of one who was supposed to be dead.

They all three walked from the piazza to meet the scout, and as they approached the spot where he had halted at the rack to hitch

his horses, they saw that the one with him was securely bound.

"Well, Captain Cody, I am glad to see you, and it appears that you have unwelcome company," said the judge in his hearty way.

"Most welcome company rather say, judge, as I have captured a man whom it is not safe to have at large."

"Is Miss Vassar here, sir?" he added, quickly.

"Yes, she arrived half an hour ago, escorted by our friend here Mr. Belfont, whom you doubtless know as the Man in Blue, and to whom we all are deeply grateful for his services to Miss Vassar this afternoon."

Buffalo Bill turned to the Man in Blue and to Allan Tremain, and replied:

"Then it is true what this man told me, that the Man in Blue rescued Miss Vassar from him?"

"Yes, perfectly true."

"Oh, yes, I told you the truth, pard," said the prisoner, who was still seated upon his horse, bound hands and feet.

"May I ask how it is I find you alive, my man, when I supposed I had sent a bullet through your brain?" said the Man in Blue to the prisoner.

"You didn't send yer bullet where yer wanted to, that is all, for I hain't dead, as you see."

"It was a close call, though, as the lead grazed my temple, and I took the hint and dropped."

"The trouble was, pard, you didn't feel my pulse to see if I was dead."

And the fellow laughed, while the Man in Blue said, with a significant smile:

"It is better as it is, for now the rope will make sure work of you."

"Don't say it, Man in Blue; and besides, I'm this gent's game, not yours."

"How comes it, Captain Cody, that you captured the fellow?" asked Allan Tremain.

"I was coming by this trail when I saw him from the ridge leave his horse and creep up on some one."

"I soon saw that Miss Vassar was his intended victim, and, not wishing to fire on him, I went to where he had left his horse and awaited his return."

"When he appeared, I caught him with my lariat, and he told me that the Man in Blue had rescued Miss Vassar and ridden away with her."

"You bet he caught me with his rope, and he throws it for all there is in it," said the prisoner, while the judge remarked:

"Yes; your own testimony condemns you, my man."

"But, come in, captain, for you are in ample time for supper, and I will see that your prisoner is cared for, as his crime is too serious to allow of his escaping."

"Yes, judge, he must not escape," the scout said, firmly.

"No, indeed, for an example made of a few of his kind, judge, would do a great deal of good in the settlement, from all I hear of the lawlessness here."

"I am going to the village from here, and I shall be glad to place the fellow in the lock-up you have there, if Captain Cody will intrust him to my care."

For a moment Buffalo Bill was silent, but then replied:

"He is in the hands of Judge Tremain, sir, and if he is willing for you to guard him to Silver Thread to-night, I certainly am."

"Oh, yes, though we can secure him here to night, if you will remain until to-morrow, Mr. Belfont."

"Thank you, sir, but I must go on soon after supper, and I will see that the prisoner is safely delivered in the Silver Thread lock-up," was the reply of the Man in Blue.

"I must thank you, sir, for saving me a long ride," the scout remarked, while the judge said:

"But you will remain with us overnight, Cody?"

"Thank you, sir, I will," was the reply, and the prisoner having been left in the charge of a cowboy, who was told to give him some supper, the judge led his guests into the house, as it was twilight now, and they joined the ladies, who gave Buffalo Bill a warm welcome, while the Man in Blue said:

"It seems, Captain Cody, that I have met you before our meeting at Trail End City."

in fact, am I mistaken in saying that you are the famous scout, Buffalo Bill?"

"I did not know that I was famous, sir; but you are not mistaken in believing that I was known as Buffalo Bill, though now I have come to Silver Thread to find a home."

"As I have done," and the Man in Blue offered his arm to Mrs. Tremain, as supper was announced, with all the grace of a courtier.

An hour after he took his leave, accompanied by the prisoner, while, hardly had he gotten out of sight before Buffalo Bill, against the urging of all, mounted his horse and followed in the trail of the Man in Blue.

"He recognized Cody, and the latter is certainly suspicious of the Man in Blue," said the judge, while Myrtle added:

"What magnificent looking men both of them are; but I watched them closely and they are doomed to be foes, never friends."

CHAPTER XXIX.

BUFFALO BILL GROWS SUSPICIOUS.

It was after supper, while the Man in Blue was singing a duet with Myrtle Tremain, that Buffalo Bill managed to slip out of the parlor after giving a significant look to Allan Tremain to follow.

They walked a few paces away from the house, and then the scout said:

"See here, Mr. Tremain, I have lived so much among bad men and Indians, that I am growing suspicious of many who may be all right in reality."

"I do not wonder, Captain Cody, that you are suspicious, living with your life in your hands as you do; but, who has awakened your suspicions now?"

"It may be all simply distrust, but will you, if the Man in Blue comes here often, and come he will, keep an eye on him without appearing to do so?"

"I will of course; but do you really think he is one to watch?"

"He may not be, and yet, who knows anything about him?"

"He has a record as a man-killer, as you know, though I admit he is not one who seems to seek trouble, and he certainly rendered us good service at Trail End City, and rescued Miss Vassar from that outlaw."

"But I'll tell you frankly that I am suspicious of him, and when he leaves to-night I go too, so explain it to your father, please."

"I will, Captain Cody; but, do you need my aid?"

"No, thank you, for I am merely going to see that the prisoner is delivered safely in Silver Thread lock-up, for I want that man for future reference."

"I'll explain your going to father and the ladies," was the answer, and the two returned to the parlor where the voice of the Man in Blue was heard singing Annie Laurie with exquisite expression and melody.

It was soon after that the Man in Blue took his departure, followed five minutes after by Buffalo Bill, and Myrtle's close observation of both men caused her to make the remark that she did, that they could never be friends.

"I do not see why, Myrtle, for the Man in Blue is certainly a most charming gentleman, just the kind to win friends, I should say," said Blanche.

"I admit that he is a fascinating man, Blanche, refined, courtly in his manners, and a fine talker, though modest and unassuming, and yet there is that about him that impressed me unfavorably also, though what it is I cannot tell or explain, and I could never know him better than I do to-night."

"I certainly saw that he also impressed Captain Cody, and yet not favorably I feel certain, and the two men seemed to read each other, or that is my opinion."

"Why, Myrtle, you argue your case like a lawyer," said Allan Tremain laughing, and he added:

"But you are right I am sure, for Cody did not appear to take to the man when he came to our aid in Trail End City, and to night he certainly was watching him closely and followed on his trail really because he had some doubt of him."

"What doubt could he have, Allan?" asked Blanche.

"Well, the prisoner offered Captain Cody,

the latter told me, a couple of thousand dollars if he would allow him to go, no one else knowing of his capture, and he had the money with him, too, the scout said, and, therefore, there was a desire on his part not to let the fellow escape should the Man in Blue yield to the temptation of the same offer."

"But Mr. Beifont is very rich, I believe," urged Blanche.

"He may and he may not be, my dear."

"I have heard it said that he has found some rich mines, yet he is not working them that I know of, and it may all be talk."

"I rather like him myself, but I have that confidence in Cody that I am sure he is not one to make a mistake, and if he suspects Beifont he has some good reason for it, and these are times to be suspicious in this valley after all that we have gone through with," and the judge spoke earnestly, but it was certain that Blanche was determined to champion the Man in Blue.

In the mean while Buffalo Bill had gone but a short distance along the trail after them when he suddenly turned off to the right, and, putting his horse into a sweeping gallop, held on at that pace for some miles.

Then he approached the main trail again through a canyon, and hitching his horse he walked rapidly to a group of rocks around which the road turned that the Man in Blue and his prisoner would have to ride.

He had not waited long before he heard voices and hoof-falls approaching, but what was being said he could not hear, and reaching the rocks the two ceased talking.

But they passed within a few feet of the scout lying in wait and continued on along the trail.

Mounting again, Buffalo Bill rode on, to at last halt near the group of cabins that comprised the village of Silver Thread City.

"Well, he certainly has delivered up the prisoner at the lock-up, and now to see which way he will go," and hardly had the scout uttered the words when the Man in Blue dashed by the place where he had halted in the shadow of some trees, riding at full speed.

CHAPTER XXX.

WHAT THE JAILER HAD TO SAY.

It was nearly dawn when Buffalo Bill at last reached his home, at Solace Lodge, both his horse and himself very tired after their long day's ride and work.

Doctor Donohue had long since gone to bed, and the scout quickly turned in.

Dallas Donohue loved his ease, even in Borderland, and was not an early riser, so when Buffalo Bill slept late the next morning it just chimed in with his humor, and it was nine o'clock before they had breakfast.

The scout had taken a great fancy to both Doctor Donohue and Allan Tremain, and he was telling the former of his adventures of the day before, and the rescue of Blanche by the Man in Blue, when they saw a horseman approaching at a run.

"It is Allan, for I recognize his style of riding, and yet he seems to come on as though he had news," said the doctor.

A moment after Allan Tremain dashed up to the cabin, and as he threw himself from his horse he called out:

"Captain Cody, your prisoner has escaped."

"Impossible, for I saw him safe in the lock up, for the Man in Blue delivered him there after all, and Jake Jessop took him in charge."

"But he has escaped, and I came to notify you, as father deemed it best."

"We were over to Silver Thread this morning, and we could not find Jessop, so all began to look for him and we found him in the cabin lock-up gagged and in irons, while the prisoner was gone."

"As soon as he could talk he did so, and he was mad clean through as he told us that he had been wakened up at his cabin by several horsemen who said that they had a prisoner for him to lock up."

"He went with them over to the lock-up, taking the pretended prisoner along with him, and as he opened the door he was struck a violent blow that half-stunned him, and then they quickly gagged and bound him,

after which they took out the prisoner and locked him within in his place."

"Not a word was spoken, only the prisoner laughed and said:

"'Jake, the jail was never built that would hold a Boy in Black, nor the rope made that will hang one.'

"Then he mounted and the party rode away, so father thought it best for me to come and notify you at once."

"I am glad that you did, Mr. Tremain, and—"

"Don't Mister me, Captain Cody, but call me plain Allan, pard or Tremain."

"All right, pard, I'll go you; but now we'll ride to Silver Thread and pick up the trail of those Boys in Black and see where it came from and where it leads."

"Will you go, doctor?"

"Oh, yes, for I may be needed," and ten minutes after the three mounted and rode rapidly away.

It was over an hour's ride to Silver Thread, and when they got there they found quite a crowd gathered, and Jake had told his story over and over again, until one of the men said:

"Say, Jake, pull the string on yourself, or you'll wear your teeth out talking."

The crowd laughed, but Jake was very wrathful over his prisoner's escape, and was glad when Judge Tremain called him to one side and told him to again tell the whole story over to Captain Cody, the doctor and Allan Tremain.

"You saw the men?" asked Cody.

"Oh, yes."

"One pretended to be a prisoner?"

"Yes, he was bound I thought, only he wasn't, for he was the one who hit me—see, he gave me a black eye, and they had me gagged and tied before I could say any thing."

"How many were there?"

"I counted seven men, including the man who done me."

"How were they mounted, dressed, and what did they say?"

"They rode black horses, but were not masked, though they seemed rigged up in a black suit."

"Only the prisoner spoke as they left, and then I was left in the jug while they rode off, and that's all I know."

"Who brought you the prisoner?"

"The Man in Blue just before midnight, and he told me to keep him subject to the call of Judge Tremain, who would try him for some crime he had committed, and that's all I know, pard."

Buffalo Bill made no reply, but thanked the keeper of the cabin known as the "Silver Thread Jail," and rode away, followed by the judge and the two young men.

"Well, Cody, what move is next to be taken?" the judge asked, when the four had ridden half a mile from the fort.

"I am following this trail of the fugitive and his rescuers, sir."

"Ah, yes, their trail."

"I see it now; but you will want more of us to go with you."

"No, judge, I will go alone, unless the two young gentlemen wish to go with me, for you, sir, are not to track criminals but to try them after we catch them."

"Well, Cody, I obey orders always; but you certainly will need more men, as Jake Jessop said there were seven of them."

"We are not going to fight outlaws now, judge, but to track them."

"They are already safe from immediate pursuit, but much can be found out by the signs of a trail, and we will report results on our return."

"See here, Captain Cody, you have not the most perfect confidence in the Man in Blue?"

"I can only say, sir, that I suspect him, perhaps without reason; but when I am suspicious of a man I watch him—I am watching the Man in Blue," and leaving the judge to return to his home, Buffalo Bill and his two tenderfoot pards continued on along the outlaws' trail.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A CHAIN OF EVIDENCE.

"SEE here, pards, I tie to you every time, and if you have not been long on the frontier you are learning your lessons fast and well."

"I can trust you, and that is saying a

great deal, and now I'll tell you frankly that I do not like the Man in Blue."

So said Buffalo Bill as the two young men rode on with him after leaving the judge.

"Is it prejudice that prompts your doubt, Captain Cody, or proof of guilt?" asked Doctor Donohue.

"So far from its being prejudice, I should be prejudiced in his favor, for he certainly came to our rescue in Trail End, and again helped Miss Vassar out of a very serious scrape.

"He is a gentleman in appearance and outward actions, but he is, mark my words, a man to watch.

"Mind you, I do not say that he is guilty of any crime that drove him West, that he is an outlaw; but he has a home in Trail End City, another in the Sunset Mining Camp, and now he has a ranch over beyond the range.

"No one knows a word about his antecedents, and he never speaks of himself or one being who holds a claim upon him.

"He knew me, as you saw, and yet, as the Man in Blue or Ford Belfont, I never saw him in my life, before the night I met him in the Last Chance Lay-out at Trail End City.

"Now, I may have imagined it, but I thought I saw a look pass between the Man in Blue and the prisoner.

"He volunteered to take my prisoner to Silver Thread and lock him up; was it through kindness for me, to prevent my going ten miles out of my way?

"The prisoner offered me a good, large bribe, and he had the money, to let him go, and when I did not, he seemed very little worried about his fate.

"Now, the Man in Blue did deliver the prisoner to Jake Jessop, and within an hour or so after he was released by six or seven men.

"How did these men know he was a prisoner?

"If they saw him captured, why did they not rescue him from me?

"Such is the line of argument I take, and I now intend to follow the trail of the Man in Blue, see where it joins the tracks of the prisoner's rescuers, and then where it leads; but, see here: this is the track of his horse; it is a peculiar one, as you observe, and you will see that it goes back to Silver Thread, along with the men who went there to take the man out of the lock-up.

"We will find out what it means."

Both Doctor Donohue and Allan Tremain were considerably impressed with the quiet reasoning of the scout.

It did put a shade of suspicion upon the Man in Blue, and they were anxious to have it explained.

They rode carefully along on the trail, catching sight now and then of the single track of the horse ridden by the Man in Blue, and after a ride of half a dozen miles, Buffalo Bill called them to note that the trail turned off up a canyon.

Here were found the traces of where half a dozen horsemen had evidently been camping for a day or more.

"They were here all of twenty-four hours, and they came from over the Range, you see, and went back that way.

"The trail of the Man in Blue came directly to this point, and from here the rescuers started to Silver Thread lock-up and returned this way.

"There were seven horses, not including that of the Man in Blue," and Buffalo Bill went on reading the signs in a manner that amazed the two young men and won their admiration.

"You certainly know your business, Captain Cody, and I think that the Man in Blue has something to explain that it will puzzle him to do," Allan Tremain remarked.

"Yes; if he did not come here, where these men were, and lead them back to the lock-up to rescue that prisoner, all signs fail," rejoined the doctor.

"Ah! some one is coming, and at a run, too—yes, there are more than one horseman, so be ready for a fight or a stampede," cried Buffalo Bill, riding toward the shelter of some timber in the canyon, and unslinging his rifle for use, while his comrades did the same.

Just as they reached the timber a horseman dashed into view, riding at full speed,

and behind him came others as though in pursuit.

The one in advance was the Man in Blue.

CHAPTER XXXII.

AN EXPLANATION.

"The Man in Blue!" cried Buffalo Bill, as he caught sight of the horseman, and the manner in which he rode showed that he was flying for his life.

"Stand by, pards, for that looks like a pursuit, as others are coming," cried Buffalo Bill, and they could distinctly hear the clatter of hoofs in the canyon.

"If he is pursued, we have wronged the Man in Blue," said Allan Tremain.

"It looks that way—but here they come," and Buffalo Bill rode into view and hailed the Man in Blue.

"Ho, pard, this way if you seek friends." A cry broke from the lips of the Man in Blue, and he wheeled his horse off the trail and quickly rode toward the timber.

As he did so he called out:

"If you are alone turn and fly with me, for there are half a score of those fellows chasing me."

"I am not alone, and we will make a stand," called back Buffalo Bill, and as the horsemen in pursuit dashed into sight he raised his rifle to his shoulder and pulled trigger.

The crack of the rifle seemed the first intimation that the outlaws had of the presence of help for the fugitive horseman they had been pursuing so hard.

As one of their horses went down, with a bullet in his brain, the others drew rein quickly, just as Buffalo Bill called out:

"Now, pards, catch them in their surprise and let them have it, for they are Boys in Black, as you see."

The Man in Blue had now reached his rescuers, and drawn rein, but as the others raised their rifles to fire, he called out:

"See, I cannot help you, for I am in irons."

The three rifles flashed together, and then following the example set them by the scout, Allan Tremain and Donohue began to pump the lead out at the outlaws, who at once stampeded, leaving one of their number dead and another wounded on the field, while a second horse went down also under their fire.

The outlaws did not halt when they got out of sight in the canyon, but kept up their flight, as the sound of the rapid clatter of hoofs growing fainter and fainter proved.

Then Buffalo Bill remarked coolly:

"We have set them going, and, Doc, there is work for you, for we must save that fellow who is wounded, but unable to rise," and he led the way at a gallop to the scene, the others following.

There lay two of the splendid black horses the outlaws rode, and the dead form of one of the Boys in Black, and a wounded man sat on the ground further away.

"Dead! that was your shot, Mr. Cody," said Dallas Donohue, placing his hand lightly upon the pulse of the dead man.

"Now the other, doctor."

The other outlaw had drawn the mask from his face, as though for air, and dropped back in recumbent position as the scout and the others approached.

"Ho, pard, it is you, is it?"

"Better have stayed in the lock-up and taken your chances with the Vigilantes," said Buffalo Bill as he recognized his prisoner of the night before.

"Yes, it's me, and I guess I've got my graveyard medicine, so will cheat yer Vigilantes from a hangin' picnic, if you had any, which yer hain't, for the Boys in Black done for them, and scared 'em off from havin' any more.

"But I is done for."

"No, you have too much breath to have it limited by a wound.

"How is it, doctor?" said the scout.

"It is a wound in an ugly place, but the bullet may have glanced on a rib and if so it is not serious.

"I will find out soon," and the doctor told the outlaw to lie down and let him examine the wound.

"What fer?"

"If it hain't serious yer'll jab a probe into my vitals and kill me, and if it is fatal, I'll see you in my chip."

"Jist let me lie here and die in peace."

"Oh, no, we will see that you are cared for," and leaving the doctor to examine the wound, now that he had gotten out his case of instruments, which Buffalo Bill had told him never to go without in that country, he turned to the Man in Blue and said:

"Pardon me, pard, for not seeing to you before, but it was a case of the dead and dying first—you are in irons, I see."

The Man in Blue's wrists were manacled, while his feet were tied beneath his horse.

"Yes, I am tied up, but it is far better than having a rope about my neck, for those devils meant to hang me," he said.

"Indeed! how was it?"

"I delivered my prisoner at the lock-up and then started for my ranch, and right here in this canyon ran into an ambush.

"They caught both my horse and myself with lassoes, and resistance was useless.

"They said they had been waiting for a pard, who was on a special duty, and, as he was long overdue, they were sure he had been killed or captured.

"Without thinking of what they might do, I told them that they need not wait, as their pard was safe in the Silver Thread lock-up.

"I at once saw my mistake, for they decided to go and rescue him, and they ironed and bound me as you see, and I had to go along with them.

"Your being here, gentlemen, proves that you have discovered the escape of the prisoner, and were on his trail.

"When we halted, some miles back in the range, I made an effort to escape, and, wheeling my horse, suddenly dashed away.

"But for you I would have been captured, for, my hands being manacled and feet bound, I could not urge my horse any faster, and they had frankly said they intended to hang me."

The scout glanced at his two comrades at the explanation of the Man in Blue, as though to say:

"I was wrong, and did him an injustice."

Then he asked:

"Well, doctor, what of your prisoner?"

"He is either badly wounded, or is shamming it," was the reply.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

NEMESIS NAT'S WARNING.

THE wounded outlaw seemed to really have become much worse.

He flinched and groaned so under the probe, that Doctor Donohue said that the wound was either a very serious one, or the man was playing a part, for he had lapsed into a semi-conscious state.

"Well, we must get him to Silver Thread with all haste.

"Mr. Tremain, will you ride to the Noland Ranch, six miles back, for help? and he must bring a light wagon, tell him.

"Doctor, I will leave you with the prisoner, while I continue on along this trail, for I wish to find out just where those outlaws have taken cover."

"Then you have not given up scouting, after all, Buffalo Bill?" said the Man in Blue.

"Oh no, not when in a good cause.

"As I have come here to settle, it is my duty to aid my neighbors all I can, and I am for freeing this valley of the lawless element in it, and do it in a way that will check it for good."

"Why not organize a band of Vigilantes?"

"That has been done," said Doctor Donohue, but a quick, warning glance from the scout caused him to hedge with the remark:

"But the outlaws killed them all."

"I had heard so, and for that reason think another band should be raised, for I, for one, would be glad to join them."

"We must protect the valley in some way," evasively said Buffalo Bill, and as Allan Tremain had gone to the Noland Ranch, and the doctor was still working with the wounded prisoner, he continued:

"Which way do you ride, Mr. Belfont?"

"With you, for I must return home, and I am anxious also to see where this trail leads," and with a wave of the hand to Doctor Donohue, the Man in Blue rode on with Buffalo Bill.

"They found that the outlaws had kept up their rapid flight for miles, as though they had been fearful of pursuit in numbers, and the scout remarked:

"I only wish we had half a hundred men with us to go on and wipe out these fellows now."

"Have you any idea of their force?"

"So many stories are told of their numbers that it is hard to get at the truth; but I guess they have all of a dozen in their band."

"Yes, at least that, so it would not take over twice that number of Vigilantes, if properly led, to run them down or drive them out of the country."

"Since the other Vigilantes were hunted down by the outlaws, it has frightened settlers off from joining a band; but here is some one ahead in our trail."

"Yes, it is old Nemesis Nat the Hermit of the Range."

"You know him then?"

"I have met him in my wanderings, and have heard something of his sad story."

"Do you know him?"

"I did years ago, when he was on the war-path as an avenger."

"He still is an avenger."

On the side of the trail, calmly awaiting their approach, stood old Nemesis Nat, and as they came near Buffalo Bill called out:

"Ho, Nemesis Nat, how have you been since I met you years ago?"

"It was reported you were dead."

The old man looked straight at the scout, seemed to quickly read the meaning in his words, and said slowly:

"Yes, I does know yer face."

"We has met before, but yer name slips my memory just now—let me see, is you Wild Bill Hickok?"

"No."

"Texas Jack?"

"Guess again, old man."

"You have forgotten the king of them all, Nemesis Nat—Buffalo Bill," said the Man in Blue.

"Lord bless my soul, but you are Buffalo Bill, I guesses; but you know we wasn't on the best of terms, Bill, and so I wanted to forget you," and the old man spoke coldly, and turning to the Man in Blue, said with considerable sarcasm:

"Well, Blue Jay, is you still prowlin' around after gold, and hain't lost your scalp in the hunt for it?"

"No nor do I intend to, Nemesis Nat," was the laughing reply of the Man in Blue, who did not seem angered at the way he had been spoken to.

"Well, all I have got to say is that if you goes half a mile further on this trail, you'll run into an ambush that will lay you both out—mark what I says, for I knows that which I tells you," and shouldering his rifle Nemesis Nat walked quickly away up the steep mountain-side.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE INSULT.

THE words and manner of the old hermit, Nemesis Nat, seemed a surprise to both Buffalo Bill and the Man in Blue.

The latter appeared to be particularly struck by what had been said, and called out:

"How do you know that there is an ambush ahead, old man?"

The hermit avenger turned and halting a moment said with an impressive manner:

"I am self-exiled from my fellow men. I have a stern duty to perform in avenging those I loved; but I am no fugitive from justice, no outlaw, no renegade, and though I may not care either for your friendship or that of the man with you, I still am of the same race, I am human, and would not see you go into a trap set for you."

"Hence I tell you not to continue on along that trail, for death lurks there," and with this Nemesis Nat again swung his rifle over his shoulder and walked on.

"I say, old man, what is the danger ahead in our path?" called out the Man in Blue.

But no answer came, and again the Man in Blue called out:

"What danger lies ahead of us?"

"Death!"

"I will say no more," and the old man was passing on when the Man in Blue cried quickly:

"Lend me your rifle, Cody, and I will halt him and force him to tell us more?"

"I will do nothing of the kind."

"He has warned us, and that is sufficient," replied Buffalo Bill coldly.

"I am sorry, but we will not quarrel, for you saved my life and then freed me of my irons."

"That is just what I would have done for any man in like condition."

"Well, I go back now."

"Do you mean that you will turn back on the warning of that old madman?"

"It is just what I do mean."

"Well, I will not."

"I always heed a warning, come from what source it may."

"And I disregard them, especially from that old fellow."

"I do not believe there is an Indian ahead in ambush."

"He did not say they were Indians."

"Who can he mean, then?"

"Do you forget that we are following an outlaw trail?"

"That is true; but they were badly frightened and have fled to their haunts."

"Perhaps, only several might have waited to see if they were followed, and there are some splendid places for an ambush ahead of us."

"I thought you were a stranger here."

"To the people, yes, but not to the country, for I scouted through here some years ago, and that is why I knew its beauty and came here to find a home."

"Well, I shall go on."

"I advise you not to do so."

"But I will."

"You are your own master, and it has not been very long since you had a lesson that very nearly resulted fatally."

"Very true, but I take no heed of that old man's talk."

"Heed my warning, then."

"You know no more about it than what Nemesis Nat told you."

"I am a good guesser."

"Well, I shall go on."

"Better take my warning, Man in Blue."

"Why?"

"Well, you might meet a Man in Black who will hold you up, and I see that you wear costly jewels, a watch and chain, and may have money with you."

"I have considerable; but I'll take the chances."

"You may lose your life."

"I'll risk it."

"Then I'll say no more."

"Come, go with me, for two of us need have no fear should we meet any Boys in Black."

"No, I shall go back on the trail."

"You are afraid to go, then?"

"I heed the warning."

"Then you admit yourself to be a coward?"

The insulting words had not left the lips of the Man in Blue before he was covered by Buffalo Bill's revolver, the weapon cocked, the finger on the trigger, and he heard the sternly uttered words:

"Retract those words, sir, or you are a dead man!"

"I mean it!"

And Buffalo Bill's look showed that he was in deadly earnest.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE SILENT COURIER.

THE man in Blue did not change countenance at the sudden and hostile act of Buffalo Bill, but simply looked squarely into the muzzle of the revolver and then into the eyes of the man he had insulted, and said calmly and in a reproachful tone:

"My dear Cody, it was a slip of the tongue to apply the insulting epithet I did to you."

"I am so accustomed to dealing with men of a different caliber than yours, I spoke generally, and of course did not mean it, and your record is too well established for me to belie it."

"Can I say more?"

"You cannot; but the word coward is as mean an appellation to apply to a man as that of thief, liar or renegade, and I, for one, will not allow a man to brand me so, for I demand one to choose his words."

"But your *amende* is all I could ask for, and it is forgotten."

And the scout extended his hand, but it was very certain that the epithet was one that rankled yet in his brave heart.

The Man in Blue then said:

"Is it useless to ask you to still go on?"

"Yes."

"You go back then?"

"I turn back on the trail."

"And if I should run into an ambush?"

"You will have only yourself to blame for it, for you have been doubly warned."

"I thought you were going to say that if I was killed or captured you would raise a band of settlers and avenge or rescue me."

"You have shown yourself pretty able to take care of yourself thus far, Mr. Belfont, but should you get into trouble I will do all in my power for you."

"How will you know?"

"You spoke of having to mail some important letters in Silver Thread in time for the next Rider to Trail End City, and that you had left them at your ranch?"

"Yes."

"Then if you do not return yourself to mail them, you will doubtless send them by a messenger."

"I will."

"You should reach your ranch, nothing preventing you, about sunset, from what you told me of its locality."

"Yes, I will get there by sunset."

"Then either to-night or to-morrow your messenger will start for Silver Thread with the letters?"

"Yes."

"Should you not appear in Silver Thread, or be heard of by sunset to-morrow, I will be on the search for you, sir, to rescue or avenge."

"That is some comfort, at least. Good-by," and the Man in Blue rode on along the trail alone.

Buffalo Bill watched him for a few minutes and then turned back on the trail.

Then he halted, dismounted and taking a pencil and note-book from his pocket, tore a sheet from the latter and wrote:

"DEAR DOCTOR:—

"My horse will bear this to you."

"Please stake him out in the little meadow beyond the timber where we fired upon the outlaws."

"He will be safe there and in a good hiding-place."

"We met Nemesis Nat, of whom I spoke to you."

"He warned us of danger around, but Man in Blue pushed on, while I turned back—for a reason."

"Better push with your wounded man, and the dead one, for Silver Thread, and put guard of Volunteer Vigilantes over the lock-up."

"I will return when I have found the clue I am now trailing."

"Yours, B. B."

This note was tied securely to the horn of the scout's saddle, the reins were placed over it, and the horse was started on the back trail.

The scout had taken his haversack of provisions with him, his rifle and blanket, and stood watching the horse as he went along at a canter, the pace that Buffalo Bill had started him off in.

Having watched the animal out of sight, Buffalo Bill smiled grimly, and muttered:

"You will not find me so much of a coward as you implied, my dear Man in Blue, only I will not herald my approach by going on horseback and get yanked out of my saddle by a lariat, or knocked out by a bullet."

"Old Nemesis Nat was playing a double game in some way, for I marked him well, and there is something ahead on this trail for an honest man to shun."

"But I'll find out just what it is, very nearly as soon as the Man in Blue does, but not as he will, perhaps."

So saying Buffalo Bill swung his haversack to his belt, threw his rifle across his shoulder, and slowly went along the trail taken by the Man in Blue, his field-glass in his hand and his eyes searching every yard of the way ahead.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

VIGILANTES IN THE SADDLE.

WHEN Judge Tremain started on the trail homeward alone he had not gone far before

he met the first lieutenant of Buffalo Bill's Volunteer Vigilantes, and he hailed him quickly with:

"Ho, Kent, you are the very man I wish to see."

"Yes, judge, I am at your service, sir," said the young settler.

"You could call out the Vigilantes, could you not?"

"If Captain Cody was away, sir, and there was reason for it."

"Cody is away and there is reason for it."

"The fact is, Kent, my adopted daughter, Blanche, was kidnapped yesterday by one of the Boys in Black, acting for his chief."

"She was rescued by the Man in Blue, and Cody caught the outlaw."

"The Man in Blue took him to the lock-up, but he was rescued last night by half a dozen or more of his companions, and now Cody, my son Allan, and Doctor Donohue have gone off on their trail, and since I parted with them, twenty minutes ago, I have been growing more and more anxious about them, and I really wish you would signal in some of the members and accompany me as a reserve to Cody in case he should get into trouble and need help."

"I will do so, judge, upon your request, for that is sufficient."

"I had heard of the escape of a prisoner Captain Cody had sent to Silver Thread, and was going in to see if I was wanted."

"I set three signals as I came along, for members of the band to meet me at Silver Thread, and at least half a dozen should be along very soon, and we will start with them, while others may have happened in there."

"That is good; but will your men come by this trail?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then, Kent, you ride on into Silver Thread and get any of your band you may find there while I, who know your men, will halt any that come along and await you at the Range Trail, a mile back."

"In that way we will gain time, and I cannot drive off the feeling that Captain Cody needs aid, starting as he did on that trail and with only two tenderfoot boys with him, so to speak."

"I'll not resent the slander on the Volunteer Vigilantes, judge, as one of the tenderfoot you refer to is your son, the other his friend," said Kent, smiling, and then he added:

"But they are the kind to tie to."

"I will ride on at once, sir, and be back at the Cross Trails within the hour with any of the men I can pick up."

The judge dismounted, and began to wait for the coming of any of the band who answered Kent's signals, and who would come by that way, as just there three trails met.

He had not long to wait before a young man came in sight, riding at a gallop.

"Ho, Houston! answering Kent's signal, I suppose?"

"Yes, judge."

"He has gone on into Silver Thread to find others, and you are to wait with me, for others are to come soon."

"All right, judge; I cut right across the country of two others, but they were too far off to recognize them."

The other two referred to came along soon, and were halted by the judge, who explained the situation.

It was not long after that three came in a bunch, and as half a dozen had now reported, the judge mounted and they rode back to Cross Trails, where he had parted with Buffalo Bill and his two companions something over an hour before.

They had not very long to wait before they heard the clatter of hoofs coming rapidly along, and soon there dashed into sight Kent and four more of the Volunteer Vigilantes.

"A little late, judge, but we can keep right on, sir."

"I am glad to see you have six of the boys, for now we number eleven Vigilantes and the judge."

"Boys, the judge says that Captain Cody, Lieutenant Tremain, and Surgeon Donohue started on the trail of a party of Boys in Black, more than double their number, so we start to their support, as they may need aid."

"Now, forward"

And the young officer leaped into the saddle, his men followed his example, and the Vigilantes were off on the trail.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A DUEL TO THE DEATH.

Doctor Donohue did not have an enviable wait with the wounded prisoner.

He was a skillful young surgeon, yet skill could not always detect fraud, and the pulse of the man was low and weak, while he had sunk into a comatose condition apparently.

If he was shamming he failed to betray the fact when a pin was suddenly stuck into his leg, and this led Doctor Donohue to believe that the wound was in reality a desperate one.

He watched his patient closely, and to be on the safe side decided to put the manacles on him which Buffalo Bill had unlocked with one of a bunch of keys he carried, from the wrists of the Man in Blue.

He also snapped a lasso about his feet with the remark:

"If he is really unconscious it will do him no harm, and if he is playing 'possum I am on the safe side."

"I suppose I could keep him quiet by a hypodermic of morphine, but he's safe now."

More than an hour had passed, and if the prisoner was shamming he played his part well.

All this time the doctor had been facing the body of the other fallen outlaw, and who lay but a few rods from him, but the dead held no terrors for him and he hardly bestowed a look upon the silent form.

But as he had secured the prisoner, if he was really not badly wounded, he now began to move about, and was walking over toward his own and the prisoner's horse, for they were staked not far away, when involuntarily he seemed to feel that he was not alone.

It was the instinct of danger, and he turned quickly to find a man within a few paces of him and with a revolver in hand.

The quick turn of the doctor disconcerted the man for an instant, and yet only for an instant, as he threw his revolver to a level and fired.

But Doctor Donohue had had an able teacher in Buffalo Bill, and he had nerve and courage to back up what he had learned.

To drop his hand upon the revolver in his belt, draw it, and fire was the work of a second, and his weapon flashed a moment after that of the outlaw, whose bullet had cut its way through the flesh of the doctor's leg.

Still his aim was not broken, and ere the outlaw could fire a second time he pulled trigger with steady hand.

The man leaped into the air, and as he did so, a bitter curse came from his lips, the last words he ever uttered.

Doctor Donohue stood like one paralyzed.

It was the first time he had been face to face with a death scene enacted by his hand, and he stood gazing at the fallen man for full a minute, forgetting the wound he had received.

But the clatter of hoofs startled him and a voice called out:

"Ho, Doc, what is it?"

"Ah, Allan, I am glad you have come, for I just had a close call."

"My dear fellow, you are wounded."

"Nothing but a scratch through the flesh; but my aim was surer, and I have not at least disgraced my teacher."

"But who is he, and how did he run upon you, Dallas?"

"It is our dead man, Allan, and there he has been ever since he fell."

"See! he was wounded there in the head and lay there playing dead, after he returned to consciousness, for the bullet evidently stunned him."

"I have been watching the prisoner, fearing that he was playing 'possum, but after I got him secure I started over to water the horses, when suddenly I turned, and there was my dead man resurrected and creeping up on me."

"He got me here, as you see, and my bullet crashed through his chest, and oh! what a curse he left me for a blessing."

"And now about help, Allan?"

"Noland is coming with his ambulance a

short distance back—ah! there he comes now."

"No, that sound comes from the other direction, Allan, so it must be the scout."

"Yes, there he— No, it is only his horse."

"Great God! can Buffalo Bill have ridden into an ambush and been killed?" and the young men stood anxiously awaiting the coming of the scout's horse, which was cantering toward them at a steady gait.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE DUMB MESSENGER.

The young men turned pale with dread, as they beheld the riderless horse of Buffalo Bill coming toward them, for it seemed to indicate that the scout had been killed or wounded.

They had become greatly attached to the scout, recognizing his noble qualities, and realizing all that he had done for them.

As though conscious that he bore some news of importance the splendid horse came on with arched neck and halted right before Doctor Donohue, whose eyes at once caught sight of the piece of paper tied to the saddlehorn with a buckskin thong.

"Ah! a message from Captain Cody!"

"I sincerely hope he is not hurt and unable to ride here," and Dallas Donohue hastily unfolded the letter and read what the scout had written, Allan Tremain listening to every word with the same interest that was felt by the young doctor.

"Thank Heaven he is all right, Doc."

"Yes, Allan, but how long will he be, going on as he does alone on the trail, and on foot?"

"I wonder what clue he is on?"

"It is hard to tell; but if the Man in Blue did not heed the warning of Nemesis Nat and Cody did, I would say that he is still dogging Belfont to see what he can make out of him."

"It would appear so, and in spite of the Man in Blue appearing as he did in irons, a fugitive from the outlaws, I could see that Cody still had a suspicion against him that something was wrong."

"I noticed that also; but the Man in Blue is all right and Cody is wrong in that quarter."

"Maybe, but I shall wait and see."

"I only wish we had some of the Vigilantes here to go on after the scout."

"So do I—but hark!"

They listened for a minute and Doctor Donohue said:

"It is your man coming with the ambulance."

"No, that is the sound of horses in a gallop, Doc—listen!"

They soon heard the thud of a number of hoofs and at once were on their guard, for who, or what they were who were coming they could not tell.

"We may have to fight for it, Allan."

"Yes; but they are on the trail coming from Silver Thread."

"You are right, so they cannot be foes."

"I hope not; but little did we dream when at old Yale we would have such adventures as we have met on the frontier."

"Why, they call football dangerous at Yale, but here it is dangerous to be alive, and the men who die natural deaths lie few and far between; but here come friends or foes, so stand ready for a fight or a foot-race."

"It is neither, for I recognize the judge."

"Hurrah! there are a dozen of our Vigilantes with him, and there is Kent also."

The band of Vigilantes with the judge and Lieutenant Kent at their head, rode rapidly up to the spot where the young men stood and came to a sudden halt, all of them gazing in wonder at the forms of the dead and wounded outlaws.

"Well, boys, this looks like hot work."

"How did it happen, and where is Captain Cody?" said the judge.

"It was hot work, father, for a while; but Captain Cody has gone on ahead on the trail with the Man in Blue, whom we rescued from the outlaws, and he sent me after an ambulance—there it comes now—and left the doctor here with that wounded man, and one who was supposed to be dead."

"But the dead man was playing 'possum, and he and the doctor had it out a while ago—you see Donohue's wound, and there is

no mistake but that the man is dead enough now."

All listened attentively to the story told by Allan Tremain; and then the letter of Buffalo Bill, sent by his dumb messenger, was read and commented upon.

But Noland came up then with an ambulance, and the wounded outlaw and the dead one were placed in it to be sent to Silver Thread.

Then the Vigilantes decided that it would be best to push on after their chief, and, if he was in danger, rescue him from it.

So on went the band of Vigilantes, each one of them, save the doctor and Allan Tremain, being experienced plainsmen, and being as well able to follow a trail as an Indian.

Judge Tremain had been urged by all to return with Noland and had done so, feeling assured that with the Volunteer Vigilantes on the trail, he could return home and feel no further dread regarding Buffalo Bill.

They had found the spot where the Man in Blue had parted with Buffalo Bill and were making their way through a wide canyon, when suddenly, from a short distance ahead of them, they heard rapid firing, and Allan Tremain called out:

"There is deadly work ahead, men, for that is the ring of Buffalo Bill's rifle."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

BUFFALO BILL CORNERED.

WHEN Buffalo Bill had sent his horse back with the note to Doctor Donohue, he watched the animal until he was out of sight.

Then he turned, and glancing down the trail muttered to himself:

"I am like a Comanche, a great deal braver on horseback than afoot.

"I am playing a bold game, but it's to win or lose, and you bet I am on this trail to camp, for I cannot drive the kink out of my mind that I am being fooled by some one.

"Well, we shall see," and Buffalo Bill strolled on along the trail taken by the Man in Blue.

Afoot he could hide himself when, had he gone on horseback, it would have been impossible for him to do so.

He could go on foot in many places when he could not have ridden, and then the fall of a horse's hoofs would have been heard by a keen ear quite a distance off.

Creeping from rocks to rocks, timber to timber, yet holding generally the course taken by the Man in Blue, Buffalo Bill continued on his way for a couple of miles and had seen no sign of danger lurking in his path.

Coming to a wide canyon with a stream flowing through it, and precipitous sides, the scout said to himself:

"If they are lying in wait it is at the head of this canyon.

"But the trail of the Man in Blue goes on, and so will I," and he swung down into the canyon with a step that was quick and untiring.

He came to a meadow in the canyon that was nearly a mile in length, and he halted and looked long and earnestly ahead with his glass.

There was no going around, unless he went many miles out of his way, and the canyon's sides where the meadow was, were steep and would not afford a hiding place.

One-third of the way across there was a group of rocks, the only shelter the scout could find all the way.

"Well, I must risk it, trusting to luck that the outlaws are not camping in the pass just beyond the meadow," he said, and he kept on his way.

It was an unpleasant feeling that crept over him, the thought that he was being watched, and at one moment he was about to turn and go back.

But he overcame the intention and pressed on, at last coming to the pile of rocks one-third of the way across.

Here he halted, and taking up his glass while he lay in hiding, he began to searchingly regard the trail ahead.

Nothing met his view, not even a coyote or bird being visible.

"Well, I must go on, for I do not believe that I am seen," he said.

He was gathering his things together to

move on, when his ears, possessing the sensitive hearing of a hound's, caught the sound of distant hoofs.

At first he could not catch just the direction the sound came from, whether from behind or before him, the rock walls of the canyon resounding so; but at last the sound grew louder, and he suddenly said:

"Well, I'll have to run for it, or stand at bay here.

"They are coming back over the trail, and are outlaws, for they can be no one else.

"Hal there they come into view.

"I might make a run for it, and reach the cover of the hills, but I'll stand at bay and trust that they will go by and not see me—Ahl that will be impossible, for there are a dozen of them, and they will surely see me.

"Yes, Buffalo Bill, you are cornered this time, and it is a fight for life."

The face of the scout grew stern as he spoke, his eyes glittered with an angry light, and he placed himself in the best position he could to escape observation and at the same time be ready to fight to the death.

The scout seemed to fully realize that a desperate struggle was before him, and as he need expect no mercy from the outlaws, he meant to give none, to fight them in their own merciless way.

As he crouched there among the rocks at bay, his face did not move a muscle as he beheld one after the other a dozen outlaws come into view, all dressed in black, masked, and riding horses the hue of jet.

CHAPTER XL.

THE VIGILANTES AT WORK.

BUFFALO BILL watched the outlaws closely as they came on at a rush, riding in compact mass.

"I do not believe they have seen me, or know that I am here.

"They will find it out very suddenly, for I cannot expect to escape being seen, as the trail passes each side of the rocks.

"I guess I'll begin in time to let them know that I am here."

On came the outlaws at a run, coming straight along the trail toward the scout's position, and riding in close order.

"I could shut my eyes and pick them off out of that bunch," grimly muttered the scout.

Nearer and nearer until Buffalo Bill felt that he would soon be discovered and that he must act.

"They have gotten reinforcements and are going back to rescue their wounded comrade they saw fall into our hands.

"Maybe all of them won't be in at the rescue," and the eyes of Buffalo Bill brightened with a determined, menacing light as he glanced along the barrel of his repeating rifle and pulled trigger.

"One, two, three, four, five!" the shots were counted by the scout as they were fired upon the advancing outlaws.

The first shot told by dropping an outlaw from his saddle, the second wounded another, the third killed a horse and the fourth and fifth brought down another man and horse, while the wild cry of Buffalo Bill rung out with defiance to his foes.

That the Boys in Black had not seen Buffalo Bill was certain, that they had been taken by surprise was equally so.

They saw those deadly puffs of smoke coming from among the rocks and they drew rein in hot haste.

Several started to fly, but the voice of their leader checked them.

"It is but one man, the same we fought this morning.

"He has tracked us, so now take him alive!"

The surprised and partly demoralized outlaws seemed to realize that their leader spoke truly, that there was but one man.

"Charge, and take him alive!" yelled the leader, and he got his men together once more and they spurred forward toward the rocks.

But Buffalo Bill had not been idle during the temporary panic of the outlaws, for he had thrown cartridges into the place of those he had fired, drawn his revolvers and placing them on the rocks by his side was ready again to face the terrible odds against him.

But ere the outlaws had gotten fairly under way again, there was heard a loud cheer-

ing back on the trail and the Volunteer Vigilantes burst into view.

Buffalo Bill was astounded.

He heard the cheer and turned.

"They are my own Vigilantes," he cried, and in his astonishment he forgot to fire upon the outlaws.

The death-struggle had ended in victory for the scout, just as he had given up all hope of life and intended to die game.

The outlaws had again quickly drawn rein at hearing the cheer.

They were not sure that there was not more than one man in their front.

They supposed it was a trap, and that he had planned it with his comrades then coming.

There was but one thing to do, and that was to fly for life.

"We outnumber them, men; stand and fight them!" cried their leader.

But the Boys in Black did not stand.

They saw a force equal to their own in spite of the words of their leader, and they fired a volley at the scout, another at the advancing Vigilantes, and fled.

But not all of them, for Buffalo Bill opened fire again, and the long-range rifles of the Vigilantes answered the fire they had sent at them.

Several men and horses dropped, and then the flight became a running fight, with rapid shots exchanged on both sides, for the Volunteer Vigilantes had gotten down to work; they were striking a blow for revenge.

The horses of the outlaws seemed the fleetest, or were not tired, for they gained well upon their pursuers, and, once they gained the mountains beyond the pass, they scattered in all directions, and the Vigilantes were at fault and could not follow them.

But Buffalo Bill's Vigilantes had begun to hit back.

CHAPTER XLI.

STICKING TO THE TRAIL.

WHEN the Volunteer Vigilantes dashed up they gave their chief three cheers, but he called out:

"On after them, pards, and don't mind me, for I'll follow soon."

His horse was being led by a Vigilante, who soon came up, and, mounting, Buffalo Bill pressed forward rapidly.

But he came up with the Vigilantes at fault, as the outlaws had scattered, as has been said.

There was nothing to do but return over the trail, and a couple of good horses, with their saddles and bridles on were picked up, and a wounded animal was put out of his misery.

"That reminds me that I saw the chief as he fled, draw rein over the wounded men and fire his revolver down upon them.

"He was determined to let no one fall into our hands who might be bought to tell secrets.

"When they kill their own wounded, to prevent their falling into our hands, you can understand, men, the kind of desperadoes we are fighting," said Buffalo Bill.

Five of the outlaws were found dead upon the field, and, being searched, they were found to be well supplied with money, and this all went into the treasury for the common welfare of the Vigilantes.

The bodies were buried, and a couple of wounded Vigilantes were sent right back to Silver Thread under the care of Doctor Donohue, whom Buffalo Bill had congratulated upon his duel with the outlaw, for it was told to him by Allan Tremain who remarked:

"As Doc has killed his man in personal conflict, Captain Cody, I suppose that wipes out the tenderfoot in his make-up."

"You bet it does, for he is a full-fledged plainsman now with spurs on," Buffalo Bill laughingly replied, and added:

"Yes, I can no longer call either of you my tenderfoot pards."

When the outlaws were buried, the Vigilantes were congratulated by their chief upon their first battle as a band, and the scout asked Allan Tremain to thank the judge for having done what he did and helped him out of a serious situation.

"And I owe you thanks, too Pard Kent, for you did just right to signal the men.

"We have hit the outlaws a return blow,

have made them feel that we can strike back and that they shall not feel that it is all their way.

"Mr. Kent, I would camp the men back where you found Doctor Donohue waiting, and signal the rest of the band to come together also, as I shall go on from here on a scout and return to you there with what information I can get."

"Yes, sir, but you will not go alone?"

"Oh, yes, I can do better alone in scouting and will call on you and the men when I need you to act."

"I must get some provisions from some one who has them, and you had better order supplies out to the camp from Silver Thread."

"How about my going with you, Captain Cody?" asked Allan Tremain in a whisper.

"You did not come out here to be buried, Allan, but to teach school and enjoy life."

"This making a Vigilante out of you is because circumstances demanded it."

"Scouting is dangerous work, especially after those outlaws, as I came very near discovering to my cost."

"I shall not go mounted, but on foot, and I really believe I will be able to make some discovery of importance, at least I hope so."

"And the Man in Blue left you?"

"Yes, he went on alone."

"And where is he?"

"The Lord only knows, for I don't; but I am going to find out."

"You still hold suspicion against him, I see."

"I still am determined to know all about him, Allan; but I wish you to thank your father for sending the Vigilantes to my support, and tell him that if he had not done so, he would have had to write to Colonel Roy, all that his chief of scouts, sent on a special mission, was lost, strayed or stolen."

"I do not exactly like your going alone now."

"My dear pard, I have scouted two-thirds of my life alone."

"Did I have three of my pards with me that I could name, I would undertake the contract that the four of us would run the Boys in Black to ruin."

"And who are those three, if I may ask?"

"One is Wild Bill, another is Surgeon Frank Powell of the army, and the other is Texas Jack; * but now I must be off before the trails get cold," and Buffalo Bill still continued on in the trail he had been following.

CHAPTER XLII.

A STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE.

BUFFALO BILL started on the trail of the outlaws alone and on foot, while the Vigilantes were still engaged in burying the dead at the rocks near which they had fallen.

The scout moved on up to the spot where they had divided, and then began to examine the trails with the deepest interest.

He became, in fact, so much interested in one of the trails that he went back as far as the outlaws had turned about when he fired upon them.

Then he hastened on once more, reaching the hills just at twilight and camping on the trail.

He found a good camping place, built a small fire, had his supper, and, wrapping himself in his blankets, lay down for a good night's rest, for he was tired out with his hard work of the past few days.

He did not have the slightest dread of an attack or of any danger, and slept through the night undisturbed, waking up just in time to be on the trail with the first glimmer of light.

He had made up his mind what trail he would take evidently, for he went straight off on it without hesitation.

Over the range he went, keeping up a brisk and steady walk, still pressing on along the trail he had started out to follow, and toward noon he reached the plains beyond, a rolling, fertile, well-watered country, where the ranchers of the Silver Thread settlement had established cattle-ranches.

They were perhaps a dozen in number

* James B. Hickok, killed at Deadwood, Dr. Frank Powell, at present mayor of La Crosse, Wisconsin, and a noted physician known as White Beaver, and John B. Omohundro, of Texas. The latter died at Leadville, Colorado—THE AUTHOR.

and widely scattered, being many miles apart.

In a fine timber grove upon a rise was a ranch toward which Buffalo Bill was making his way.

There was a big cabin upon it of several rooms, a cowboys' cabin down on the stream, a corral for cattle, horses and steers, and the herds were scattered in the meadow land, with several horsemen watching them.

These Buffalo Bill eluded and went straight to the cabin.

A man saw him approaching and ran into the cabin, returning soon after with a rifle.

"Is it peace or war, pard, that you want?" cried the scout as the man came out.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Cody and I am a settler over in the valley."

"Is this the ranch of Ford Belfont, the Man in Blue?"

"I am."

"I would like to see him."

"He is not here."

"Do you mean it?"

"I does."

"I am sorry, for he started for his home yesterday, and I fear he has met with trouble."

"Oh, the Man in Blue can take care of himself."

"No doubt of that, if he is not trapped; but he is human."

"He's a dandy for taking care of himself, too."

"I believe you; but I am anxious about him, and hoped I would find him here, but I fear that the outlaws have got him."

"What outlaws?"

"The Boys in Black."

"No fear, for he sleeps with both eyes open."

"Well, he left me to come on to his ranch."

"I saw the outlaws, and plenty of them, and they were right on the trail he had to follow, and they had a brush with a party of settlers and got badly worsted, too."

"Good!"

"I wish that we could wipe them out; but it has been the other way in the settlement."

"The Man in Blue has had plenty of time to get here, should have arrived last night in fact."

"But how about getting dinner?"

The man stepped back nearer to the cabin, and after a moment said:

"All right, you can get dinner."

"I'm all alone, and I don't like taking strangers in."

"What's the matter with calling up the cowboys if you are afraid?"

"I hain't afraid, so come and I'll get dinner and call up the boys when it is ready."

Buffalo Bill refreshed himself with a good wash, took a seat in front of the cabin, and looked searchingly at the place and its surroundings.

He saw that the cabin was well fitted up inside.

There was a cot with mattress and silk bed spread upon it, some paintings and engravings upon the walls, a shelf of books, a table, and any number of weapons scattered about, with a guitar and violin hanging up near the door.

The table was set outside, and the man showed that he was certainly a good cook, whatever faults he might possess.

He took a horn from a peg and gave half a dozen blasts upon it, and soon after three cowboys came up at a gallop.

They leaped from their horses at the stream, hastily washed and combed their long hair, and then came forward and nodded to the scout.

CHAPTER XLIII.

A DESERTED HORSE.

BUFFALO BILL greeted the cowboys pleasantly, when the man at the cabin introduced him with:

"Pards, this be a friend o' the boss."

"Ef yer wants ter know his name, ask him, for I has forgot."

"But he says he fears ther Boys in Black has got ther Man in Blue."

The cowboys burst out into a laugh, and one said:

"You bet you is away off, stranger, for the Man in Blue hain't built that way."

"He was yesterday, for I rescued him myself from the outlaws."

The men all laughed heartily, and one of them said:

"Well, he'd 'a' got away if you hadn't rescued him, for he's that kind o' a man, nothin' holds ther Man in Blue when he gits ready to scoot."

"I hope he is so fortunate this time, but his not coming home causes me to fear for his safety."

"Don't you lose no rest fearin' for ther Man in Blue, pard, for he'll be along O. K. when he gits ready to come in."

"Won't he, fellers?"

"You bet!"

Buffalo Bill said no more, but closely watched the men, without appearing to do so, while he enjoyed his dinner as well.

When the cowboys had returned to their duty, the scout asked the man if he could leave a note for the Man in Blue.

After a moment of hesitation he said:

"Yes, come in and write it thar."

He pointed to the desk of the Man in Blue, and sitting down Buffalo Bill wrote:

"DEAR BELFONT:—

"I got anxious about you and came on to follow you up, but had a brush with the outlaws, and a party of settlers got me out of the trouble."

"Decided to come and see if you reached your ranch in safety."

"Am fearful you are in trouble."

"Will trust, however, to see you soon in Silver Thread."

"Yours,

"Cody."

"Now, pard, I'll leave the letter right here, and I wish to know if I can buy a horse from you, for I've got a little money with me."

"I don't know."

"Who does know if you don't?"

"Just wait a minute and I'll see if my horse is in the corral."

Buffalo Bill noticed that he passed through the cabin to go to the corral, and waited in there all of two minutes.

Then he came out, glanced toward the corral and said:

"Yes, my horse is there."

"You will sell him?"

"I guess so."

"What do you want for him?"

"I gave forty dollars for him, and he's a good one."

"I'll give you fifty dollars for horse, saddle and bridle, if the beast is of any account."

"You bet he's a dandy to go."

"Is he shod?"

"Yes, I shod him yesterday."

"Trot him out, and give me the best rig you can for the money, while I wish you would throw in a couple of days' grub for me."

"All right," and the horse was soon brought up and a good saddle and bridle put on him.

The man then gave the scout some provisions, received his money and said:

"I'll tell the boss you war scared for him."

"I hav'n't entirely gotten over my scare for him yet."

"Which way now?"

"I'll strike for the settlements by a lower trail, for I don't wish to run upon any more outlaws," and Buffalo Bill mounted, and with a nod to the man rode away, muttering to himself:

"This is a pretty fair horse, and I am sorry I have got to give him up."

"But I guess that it is worth it to do

He rode on at a rapid gallop, the moment he got out of sight of the ranch, but did not take the trail that he had indicated to the man at the cabin that he would.

He turned off on the trail he had come, going back through the mountains where he would be more than likely to run upon some of the outlaws.

But though Buffalo Bill rode hard across the level country, when he came to the mountains he halted where the trail divided, one following along the base of the range, the other passing over it.

"Here we part, old horse," he said, and,

dismounting, he fastened the reins tight around the saddle, started the horse along the base of the mountains, and sent him off on it in a gallop.

Then shouldering his rifle he started on foot up the mountain trail, muttering to himself:

"I must fight the devil with fire."

CHAPTER XLIV.

IN SEARCH OF INFORMATION.

RESTED by his halt at the ranch of the Man in Blue, and refreshed by his good dinner, Buffalo Bill climbed the mountain trail with quick and steady steps.

He seemed anxious to search a certain point before night, though his haste did not keep him from being cautious, and he reconnoitered well ahead of him with his glass, for he knew that he was in a very dangerous neighborhood.

At last the summit of the range was reached, and while halting for rest he looked about him.

Behind him, twenty miles away, was the speck that marked the ranch of the Man in Blue, for he had pressed the horse he bought very hard the fifteen or sixteen mile ride to the mountain.

Upon the other side, beyond the great hills, near Silver Thread Valley, and he could just pick out the little group of cabins that marked the village of the settlement.

"Now to strike for the home of Nemesis Nat, meanwhile keeping a bright lookout that some outlaw don't call me with a gun," and so saying Buffalo Bill followed along the ridge, but where there was no trail.

The sun was yet a couple of hours high, and he kept up his long stride, for he knew that he had all of eighteen miles to cover before nightfall and some of the way would be rough.

Afar off there was a group of peaks, and there he knew was the cavern home of Nemesis Nat the Hermit Avenger, the man the Navahoes feared as an evil spirit.

The sun sunk very rapidly to Buffalo Bill, but he kept up his steady pace and it was just growing twilight when he had descended to the canyon among the peaks, and took the trail to the cavern of Nemesis Nat.

He remembered the way that the old Hermit had shown him, and at last climbed to the shelf that the large cave opened upon, sheltered by the dwarf pines that grew about it.

"Ho, old pard, I am just in time."

The Hermit turned quickly, his hands dropping upon his revolvers, as he rose from before the fire where he had been cooking supper.

"Lordy, Buffalo Bill, you gave me a start, for I never heard your coming, and you are the only man who knows the way to my den."

"It would have served you right if I'd have dropped the supper into the fire."

"Well, I'd have rescued it, for I'm very hungry, very tired, and have come to stay all night with you, if you don't mind."

"I'll be glad to have you."

"I was thinking of you just now."

"Yes, think of Old Nick and his imp appears."

"But how are you, old man?"

"All right; and I've got another scalp since I saw you."

"But go to the brook and wash up, and I'll put more supper on and be ready for you, for I know what a hungry man is."

The scout enjoyed his supper greatly, for he had perfect health, appetite, and his long tramp to encourage him.

Nemesis Nat lived well, and in his wanderings picked up all kinds of game.

Over in a canyon he had fenced in a rich plot, where he raised potatoes, beets, cabbage and onions, and his coffee, sugar, flour and bacon he got at the posts, so he was able to set before the scout a supper that was very tempting, and heartily relished.

Lighting their pipes after the meal, as they sat outside in the light of a new moon, Buffalo Bill said, in an interested way:

"So you have gotten another scalp since I saw you, Nemesis Nat?"

"No, I won't say that, for I saw you too short a time ago; but since you were here, I mean."

"Ah, yes."

"Another Navaho, I suppose?"

"Yes, one of the Mormon gang."

"I got his horse, too, though I have no more use for a horse than a frog has for a tail, and he's over in the canyon feeding, if you want him, and the Indian's saddle and bridle are there, too—his weapons and scalp are in the cavern."

"Pard, I'd go you on the horse, for I deserted a good one that I bought this morning; but then he served a purpose, and that is all I can ask."

"Now I wish to talk to you."

"Don't be too curious, Bill, for I warn you I won't answer," was the reply of Nemesis Nat.

CHAPTER XLV.

BUFFALO BILL AND THE AVENGER.

BUFFALO BILL smiled at the words of the Hermit Avenger, that he would not answer certain questions, and said:

"Pard, I do not wish you to answer any question you think you should not, or could not conscientiously."

"Fire away, Bill."

"You met me last with a companion?"

"Yes."

"He was known as the Man in Blue."

"He was properly called, to judge from his clothes."

"Ever see him before, Pard Nat?"

"Yes, I've seen him when he didn't know it."

"How is that?"

"You know I frequently hang out on the trails?"

"Yes."

"I have seen him pass."

"What can you tell me about him?"

"Nothing."

"Does that mean that you cannot or will not?"

"I can tell you nothing about the Man in Blue, Bill, but as you were with him you must know something about him."

"I know so little that I am anxious to learn more."

"Let me tell you how I met him and the times I have since seen him."

"I should be glad to hear, Bill."

The scout then told of his meeting with the Man in Blue, his rescue of Blanche Vassar, and the escape of the prisoner he had taken to the lock-up, and then of his rescue of Belfont and his not having needed the warning given him by the Hermit, or his own advice for him not to go.

"Now, Pard Nat, I have just come from his ranch, and he is not there, or if he is, the man there lied to me."

"I will tell you frankly that when I strike a trail in earnest I like to see the end of it."

"You surely do, Bill."

"Now I saw in the trail of the party to rescue my outlaw prisoner, the track of the horse ridden by the Man in Blue."

"That was later explained by our rescuing him from the outlaws."

"We then went on together and met you."

"Yes."

"The warning you gave us was intended for me, Nemesis Nat."

"For you?"

"Yes."

"I know you."

"Yes, and you know the Man in Blue."

"Why do you say so?"

"I saw a look pass between you and the Man in Blue."

"I read it that he was surprised at your warning, and I felt that the warning was for me, and I took it."

"It was for you, Bill."

"There were no Indians in ambush?"

"Not one."

"They were outlaws?"

"Yes."

"In ambush beyond the pass?"

"Yes."

"I thank you, Pard Nat, for you kept me out of trouble."

"But I did see the look pass between you, and the Man in Blue went on, after trying to force me to go with him, in fact I resented his words about being afraid to go."

"You afraid, Bill?"

"He don't know you."

"Oh, yes, he knows me, but he was trying to browbeat me into going."

"I turned back on horseback, sent my horse back to the camp, and went on the trail of the Man in Blue on foot."

"I made a discovery, too."

"Well?"

"I found that the track of the horse ridden by the Man in Blue came back to the meadow where I opened on them."

"It turned there and went back with the crowd of horsemen."

"The horse of the Man in Blue did?"

"Yes."

"And the rider?"

"Was masked and dressed in black, so of course I could not see him."

"I then decided to let the Vigilantes return to camp, as I might need them; you see I place confidence in you, Nemesis Nat."

"That is right; I will never betray you."

"I went on my way then on foot and reached the ranch of the Man in Blue."

"Well?"

"I went there, guided by the track of the same horse, the one ridden by the Man in Blue."

"But you say he was not there?"

"If he was, he did not show himself; but I noticed several times that the man in charge, before answering my questions, evidently held conversation with some one hidden in the cabin."

"You are a close observer, Bill."

"My life too often depends upon close observation for me not to be."

"Well, what do you make out of all this?"

"You will not tell me?"

"I cannot."

"Then I will tell you later, for I am camped on the trail now, pard."

"Now let us turn in, for I make an early start."

CHAPTER XLVI.

UNDER FALSE COLORS.

BUFFALO BILL is a man who does his work well and thoroughly, and that was said of him when he was scouting for the army.

He would never leave a trail until he had gotten to the end of it, and risking life with him was a minor matter if he accomplished what he set out to do.

When he left the cavern home of the Hermit the next morning the sun was rising, but the two had risen early enough to have a good breakfast before the scout departed upon the trail.

The avenger accompanied him to the canyon where he had the Indian pony, and Buffalo Bill found him to be a fine roan with excellent points.

"He will do very well and I will buy him from you, Pard Nat."

"No you won't, for I am not a trader."

"I got the Injun's scalp and that was all I wanted."

"The horse I do not want or need, so take him."

"I certainly am obliged to you; but say, Nat?"

"Yes, Bill?"

"You have Injun toggery enough to fit out a camp, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"War-bonnets, clothing, weapons and such?"

"Oh, yes."

"Any paint?"

"Plenty."

"Well, here is an Indian pony, saddle and bridle."

"Yes."

"Take me back to the cavern, Nemesis Nat, and rig me up as an out and out red-skin."

"What about your mustache, Bill?"

"I cut my imperial off to come here on a mission to Silver Thread Valley, and I whack off the mustache to play Injun."

"It will spoil your looks, Bill."

"Looks don't go in this game, Pard Nat."

"Don't play it."

"Why?"

"You are going to take big chances I know."

"No indeed, I am going to keep from getting shot from an ambush, unless you head me off somewhere on the trail and kill me for my scalp."

"No, I'll know you, Bill."

"Well, the Navahoes and outlaws are at peace, are allies in fact, and I speak fairly well the language of the tribe, well enough to fool a white man anyhow, and if they cannot understand me my revolvers can be interpreters for me."

"I am going through a part of the country to-day where I am likely to run upon some of the Boys in Black, in fact I think they are camping on some of the trails."

"When it would be dangerous for Buffalo Bill to go through, the brilliant idea has just struck me that a Navaho chief would be safe, so off goes the mustache and I want you to make an Injun out of me, Nemesis Nat that will be so real you will want to scalp me for a Navaho."

"You really wish it?"

"I do."

"Come back to the cavern, and I'll metamorphose you so no one would think you were not a Navaho."

"I'm with you, pard," said the scout in a cheery tone, and the two returned to the cavern.

An hour after Buffalo Bill was completely disguised as an Indian chief.

He had braided his long hair, weaving into the braids pieces of yellow flannel, had cut his mustache off and couple of days' beard, was painted a terra cotta color, face, neck, arms and hands, and had streaks of black, yellow, red and blue war paint over this.

Upon his head he wore a gorgeous war-bonnet, and he was dressed in an Indian costume, moccasins and blanket as well.

His own clothing was wrapped up in a blanket and strapped behind his saddle, and his rifle was hidden under a loose blanket, while his revolvers were stuck in cuts in his buckskin hunting-shirt ready for use.

He carried an old rifle with him, a lance, bow and arrows and scalping-knife, and as he mounted his pony Nemesis Nat said, with a laugh:

"Quick, Bill, go away from here before I shoot you for an Indian."

The scout laughed and rode away, taking the trail that would lead him over the range, where he would be most likely to fall in with outlaws, if they had not gone to their retreat after their brush with his Volunteer Vigilantes in the meadow.

"If the Vigilantes go on a scout, they'll shoot me for a Navaho, and I must be careful not to give old Nat another look at me, for he could not resist the temptation a second time, I fear."

And thus musing, Buffalo Bill rode on his way.

CHAPTER XLVII.

PASSING THE ORDEAL.

WITH that love of the danger he ran, born of his brave nature, Buffalo Bill went along the trail on the roan Indian pony, with the sincere hope that he would fall in with both an outlaw and a Navaho.

"I would have the advantage in each case," he muttered.

The roan pony he found to be a good animal, and he pressed along at a good pace until he reached the summit of the range.

As he was glancing over the view of the valley spread out before him for many a mile, he suddenly saw a man step out in the trail ahead of him.

He was dressed in black, wore a mask, and held a rifle across his arm, but made no hostile demonstration other than to show himself and await the coming of the supposed Navaho.

"Now I'm in for it," muttered the scout.

But he did not hesitate and rode straight on, though cautiously, just as an Indian would do.

"Ho, Navaho, come on—me friend, Boy in Black—understand."

"Me know. Pale-face brave in black buckskin—Navaho's friend," said the scout in exact imitation of the Indian way of speaking.

"You bet I am your friend."

"Look on an honest face and rejoice," and

the outlaw unmasked, to the great pleasure of Buffalo Bill who said:

"Good face, heap good to red man."

"Where chief?"

"He is off on a trail somewhere."

"Where Boys?"

"In camp."

"Where camp?"

"We have a camp half a mile from here, over in that canyon, and I am here on the watch, layin' for a pilgrim that is hunting us, and hunting us hard."

"He was on the trail yesterday, and the chief sent word to rope him in."

"Have you seen any pale-face running around loose, Navaho?"

"No, see pale-face, no Boy in Black, kill him and take scalp."

"I wish you could tackle this one, for he's a hard one to down, and I've been expecting a shot from him as I waited here, and if I saw him I'd stampede."

"Where pony?"

"Yonder in the thicket, feeding."

"Want see chief?"

"I don't know where you will find him, unless you go to camp and wait."

"Many Boys in Black in camp?"

"Almost a dozen."

"No chief?"

"No."

"Where other Boys?"

"Up in the stronghold which you Navahoes have visited."

"Yes, me know."

"Boys in Black on trail this way?"

"No, not on this trail, but watching on other trails for the man I spoke of."

"Hands up, my man, for I mean what I say!"

The outlaw saw a revolver-muzzle shoved into his face, the voice and words now told him he had been taken in, and he could only obey.

So he held his hands over his head, and in an instant he had a pair of steel handcuffs slipped about his wrists and secured.

"Now open that mouth and swallow this gag."

"My God! who are you?"

"Ever hear of Buffalo Bill?"

"Who has not?"

"Let me make you acquainted with him by introducing myself."

"You are the man we have orders to hunt down—it was said that he was a scout pretending to be a settler in the valley, just to run us down."

"Your information is on the dead level, pard; but now open your mouth."

"Don't gag me, for I'll be quiet."

"Now, obey me."

The scout soon rigged up a gag and tied it in the mouth of the man, putting his black mask over it.

Then he led him to the thicket, where his horse was saddled and bridled, and making him mount he secured his feet also.

"Now we'll take a ride, pard, and excuse me if I jog along at a good pace."

Not daring to stick to the trails with his prisoner, Buffalo Bill decided to make his way along off of them as best he could.

He was just turning off the trail when he caught sight of a horseman coming through the timber a couple of hundred yards away, and who had evidently seen him first.

"It is an Indian—yes, two of them, for there is another," said the scout, aloud, and the heart of the outlaw gave a great bound of hope, for though he could not speak he had heard, and he trusted that the disguised scout would now meet his match and he be rescued.

He saw the two Indians also, and hoping there were more, looked to see what the scout would do, expecting that he would think he had run upon a band of red-skins and take to flight.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

MISTAKEN IDENTITY.

"Now comes the tug of war, Pard Outlaw, and if I go down, you come out on top."

"If I come out on top, then there is no chance for you, so pray the way you want it and I guess that will help me."

The words were coolly uttered, and the

outlaw felt that he had built without cause; the scout was not a man to desert his colors.

He could only glance at him through the eye-holes of his mask and wonder what he would do.

"Ah! more of them?" coolly said Buffalo Bill, as he saw two more mounted warriors come in sight.

"They are braves, so should obey me, a chief, eh, Boy in Black?" said Buffalo Bill.

He was about two miles from the spot where he had taken the outlaw prisoner, and he felt that he was beyond the sound of firing being heard by those in the camp in the canyon.

As the Navahoes were at war with the pale-faces, their presence in that vicinity meant that they were bent on mischief, hunting for scalps or plunder, or perhaps acting as allies for the Boys in Black.

In any case they were to be met as foes, and with four to one against him, Buffalo Bill felt that he could not be too cautious, or too particular in what he did.

The four Indians were coming directly toward him and his prisoner, when the scout had halted, as he was about to leave the trail.

That there were more red-skins near was a strong possibility, and the scout was certainly in a most critical situation.

But he did not flinch from it, and calmly awaited the second ordeal he had to undergo, though he muttered to himself in his dry way:

"It begins to look to me that in playing Injun I bit off more than I can chew—eh, outlaw?"

The outlaw hoped that he had, and wished he could have expressed it in so many words.

Ironed, masked and gagged as he was, his feet bound under his horse, he was wholly unable to give the Indians any warning of danger.

He saw that they supposed they were coming upon a chief of their own tribe, and in spite of his own critical situation he admired the scout's wonderful nerve and waited the result with an interest that he felt keenly but could not give expression to.

When the four Indians, for the two behind were coming up faster now, as though to hear what was said and to see what chief they were meeting, came within ten paces of the scout and his prisoner, one of them said something which seemed to interest the other three, for they looked fixedly at Buffalo Bill.

Whether they did not recognize the supposed chief, or suspected some trap, Buffalo Bill did not wait to see, for suddenly his hands shot forward, each grasping a revolver, and both weapons began their deadly music together.

Down went an Indian from his saddle, a second one rode forward to grapple with his foe, a third was wounded, and the fourth turned back down the trail uttering loud cries as he did so.

The cries were instantly answered back down the trail by several voices, and Buffalo Bill knew that he was in for it, that he could make no mistake, and threw no shot away then.

So another Indian fell, but the third was almost upon him and fired his rifle as he came on, while the fourth red-skin, having called for help now came back to join in the fight.

At the shot from the Indian, Buffalo Bill had dropped from his horse, down behind him as a shelter, and had drawn his rifle from where it hung in the blanket.

But a groan from the outlaw had followed the shot of the Indian, and he had fallen forward upon the horn of his saddle, his bonds keeping him from dropping to the ground.

Buffalo Bill gave a quick glance at him, and then turned to the fourth Indian who was coming on, while several others just then appeared in sight, rushing for the scene of encounter.

But from off the trail on one side a shot was heard and the fourth Indian tumbled from his saddle, while springing into view came Nemesis Nat, who called out:

"I guess we can handle them together, Buffalo Bill!"

CHAPTER XLIX.

NEMESIS NAT TO THE RESCUE.

THE moment that Buffalo Bill saw Nemesis Nat, he felt that the battle was not lost to him if a dozen Indians appeared upon the scene.

He felt a regret that the shot of the Indian had killed the outlaw prisoner, and he was fully alive to the situation that the camp of the Boys in Black was near enough for a force to come from there should the firing be heard.

While these thoughts flashed through his mind, he was not idle, for quickly securing his horse and that of the outlaw, he had moved to the front with Nemesis Nat, whose rifle was doing deadly service.

When the Indians beheld Nemesis Nat, and from the firing knew that he had some aid, they turned in terror and fled.

"Five scalps more for my string, Bill," quietly said the old avenger, as he approached the scout.

"Yes, pard, and you were in time to save mine, as it looks to me."

"You were doing well when I chipped in, pard, and I only got five of 'em, though I'll take the scalps of your red-skins, too."

"You are welcome to them, pard; but how does it happen that you are here just in the right time to help me out?"

"When I like a man, Bill, it is no half-way business with me, and I like you."

"I saw you making a fool of yourself, so wanted to help you out, and so I cut across country and here I am."

"I sincerely appreciate your goodness, old man."

"Don't speak of it, for I get my pay in the scalps here."

"But are you aware that there is an outlaw camp near here—yes, within hearing?"

"So that outlaw prisoner I had told me; but I am sorry he got killed."

"Saved him from the gallows, so he's in luck."

"But I wanted to have a talk with him, and see if I could not get some information from him; but it seems that each one in some way escapes me."

"It would have done no good, Bill, for those fellows can't tell the way they are fixed, and so don't look for one to betray his comrades for gold or from fear of threats."

"But how about the dead outlaw and the red-skin?"

"I suppose we must bury them."

"You bet we won't, for the outlaws will be here, as they must have heard the firing, and—here they come now."

Buffalo Bill turned quickly and grasped his rifle, but the old avenger said in a low tone:

"Don't be a fool, Bill—get on your pony and leave it to me, but let me get those irons off the man and then just listen to me lie to soft music."

To have attempted to ride off would have brought the fire of the outlaws, when they saw that there had been trouble there, so leaping upon his pony Buffalo Bill calmly awaited the approach of the Boys in Black, while Nemesis Nat took the keys he had thrown at his feet and freed the dead outlaw of his irons, thrusting the latter into his pocket and facing the horsemen as they rode up.

They carried weapons in their hands and were ready for action, one of them calling out:

"Ho, Nemesis Nat, what does this mean?"

The old avenger did not speak until the whole party, nine in number, had halted near and were gazing with wonder upon the scene.

Then he said in the coolest manner possible,

"A family quarrel, that's all."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, as to the merits of the case I do not know, but your pard there, and the red skin nearest him lying there, got into trouble and pulled their guns."

The white man fired first, and down went the red-skin, and, seeing that he had begun work, the Boy in Black kept it up, and it was give and take and hands all round when the chief here tried to check his warriors and save the white man, and they turned upon him.

"I'm a white man, and I go for my own race every time, so I chipped in, and these red-skins that are now lying around loose here got away; but the chief did all he could for your pard and for me, too, so I don't want his scalp."

"You don't speak English, chief, but that's about the way of it, wasn't it?"

"Yes, Blue Wing speak English heap little."

"Snow Hair talk straight, bad red-skin brave, bad pale-face—fight too much," answered Buffalo Bill in a most dignified manner, while he was watching the outlaws with the closest scrutiny.

"Pards, I guess all that is left for you to do is to bury the dead, for I have the scalps."

"The chief here will doubtless tell his people that it was a quarrel between a pale-face and red-skin, and that I chipped in, so there will be hard feelings I guess all round."

"How it was I didn't kill the chief or he open on me, I don't know; but he had better ride on now and join his people, for somehow my mercy toward a Navaho don't last long."

"Tra-la-la, chief, and you're in great luck to carry your scalp with you."

And the old avenger waved his hand, a movement Buffalo Bill seemed to understand, for he at once rode away down the trail.

"Say, Nemesis Nat, do you think that this trouble will get us into a row with the red-skins?" asked the leader of the outlaws.

"No; for the chief will explain it, and they will put it upon me, for every dead Navaho who is found, and no one knows how he died, is laid down to me."

"I'll just see if I cannot pick up another scalp before night—good-by!"

And the Hermit walked off on Buffalo Bill's trail.

CHAPTER L.

USEFUL INFORMATION.

BUFFALO BILL smiled at the ingenious manner the old Hermit had put the affair before the Boys in Black.

He saw that his disguise was not penetrated, that not for an instant was he suspected of being other than a Navaho chief.

The explanation of Nemesis Nat had been regarded as exactly the state of affairs, for no one thought of doubting the old Hermit, and when he walked away they discussed the matter among themselves, hoping that it would not cause the chief to blame them, should trouble follow with the Navahoes.

The chief, as they supposed Buffalo Bill to be, had certainly agreed with Nemesis Nat's statement of the affair, and had tried, the Hermit said, to check his warriors, when they had turned upon him.

He had awaited their coming with no apparent fear, and yet they thought he had ridden off as though he was angry, and hence they felt a certain anxiety over what had happened.

"Well, I suppose all we have to do is to bury the dead and report the trouble to our chief, as given us by Nemesis Nat and the Indian," said the one in charge when the Hermit had strode away.

In the mean while, once out of sight of the outlaws, Buffalo Bill had halted.

He felt sure that the Hermit would overtake him, and so he waited by the side of the trail.

In half an hour Nemesis Nat came along, and as he approached the scout he called out:

"Bill, you look so much like an Injun, I'll draw bead on you yet."

The scout laughed and replied:

"Pard Nat, I congratulate you."

"Can't I lie to soft music, though, Bill?"

"You certainly can, Nat, and you got me out of a tight place."

"Well, I came on after you to tell you to go back to your band, for though, like me, you may seem to bear a charmed life, you do not, only your time has not come yet."

"About five miles ahead turn to the right into a blind canyon, just where there is a tall pine, split by lightning."

"Nobody knows there is a canyon there, for you would never suspect it without going right up to the pine tree."

"There's a spring there, grass and wood, so go into camp, and I'll join you later and stay all night, for I want to see what those

reds are doing scouting in this range, and maybe I'll get another scalp or two."

"I did expect to go on to camp to-night, Pard Nat, but I'll halt once for your company."

"Yes, and from there on you'll hardly be ambushed as a white man, though you might catch it as a supposed red-skin."

"I'll see you soon after night," and the Hermit strode away, while Buffalo Bill rode slowly on until he came to the lightning-riven tree.

He turned to the right, off the trail, passed the tree, and suddenly rode right into a chasm which no one would have supposed was there.

The sun was sinking near the horizon then, so he went into camp, and when darkness came on began to cook supper for the Hermit and himself.

He had just gotten the meal ready when the Hermit walked into camp.

"I'm just in time, Bill, and hungry."

"Well, I went back and saw the outlaws."

"What did they have to say?"

"They are very anxious about their comrades' fight with the red-skins, fearing it will get them into trouble and their chief will blame them, and he's a man to stand no nonsense."

"Where is he?"

"Off somewhere plotting deviltry, I guess; but I'll give you a pointer."

"Yes."

"The outlaws are to be all called in for a council."

"Well?"

"They have had matters pretty much their own way until you came, and had gotten the settlers terribly frightened."

"But of late their band has suffered, they are aware that you are in the field against them and have raised a band of Volunteer Vigilantes, and they know they must at once wipe you and your band out, so they are going to meet and plan a way."

"This much I learned, and I put you on your guard—and more, the coach from Trail End City begins to run through to Silver Thread next Monday, and there are lively times ahead, Bill."

"Now I want my supper," and Nemesis Nat would say no more.

CHAPTER LI.

TRICKED.

THE camp of the Vigilantes was on the alert when they saw, as they supposed, a Navaho chief riding in upon them, but alone.

There was some cause of excitement already, for news had come from Silver Thread that the Man in Blue had called at the lock up the night before and said that he was sent by Captain Cody to take the wounded prisoner to the home of Judge Tremain, to be kept there for fear of a raid of the Boys in Black upon the village to rescue their comrade.

Doctor Donohue had at last discovered that the wounded prisoner was playing 'possum, and was really not very badly hurt.

He had set a watch upon him, and he had been caught shamming, so was quickly brought to terms when the doctor entered with a couple of the Vigilantes bearing a basin, water and towels, and the former said:

"Now I will cut for that bullet, and find it if I kill the fellow, for he will be no loss, and I am interested in knowing just the course the lead took."

In an instant the prisoner came out of his state of coma.

He was quickly on his feet, and said:

"No, you don't chop me up, doctor, for I ain't so badly wounded as you think."

"I thought I should bring you to terms, my mau, and I am glad that you are just what I believed, only slightly wounded, for that bullet glanced on your rib and did but little harm."

"I will keep you safe for Captain Cody to have a talk with."

And Doctor Donohue returned to the camp, leaving two Vigilantes on guard over the prisoner, while the balance of the band were ordered to also report for duty.

It was that same night that the Man in Blue, so the Vigilantes said, had ridden into

the village and handed them an order from Captain Cody to deliver the prisoner to him, to be taken to Hope Vale Ranch for safe-keeping.

They had obeyed and then been told to report at their camp, for such were Captain Cody's orders.

The Vigilantes had thoroughly established themselves in camp, under their officers Kent and Allan Tremain, when the two came in from the lockup with the report of what they had done the night before.

This appeared strange news, for Buffalo Bill was known to be out in their front on a scout, but the Vigilantes said that he had scouted round to the ranch of Judge Tremain and had sent the order from there.

"It may seem plausible, but I wish to see him, as I cannot see why Captain Cody would send the Man in Blue after the prisoner, and to take him to my father's," said Allan Tremain.

The matter was discussed fully, and at last it was decided that Allan Tremain should go to Hope Vale Ranch and find out just how it was that Buffalo Bill had sent the Man in Blue for the prisoner, and if he had discovered any information of importance which he had made known to the judge.

Allan knew that the Man in Blue was supposed to be in their front, on the trail that Buffalo Bill had taken, as he had gone to his ranch, and he could not understand why the message had not been sent through the Vigilantes.

So Allan mounted his horse and started for home, and he had not been gone over a couple of hours when the sentinel in the Vigilante camp reported an Indian horseman coming toward them, and with peaceful intent as he could not have but discovered them.

All was excitement at once, for, with the settlers at war with the red-skins, what could bring a chief to visit them?

Up to the group rode the chief, and as he drew rein he said quietly:

"Well, pards, what news have you?"

"Captain Cody, by the gods of war!" cried Doctor Donohue, and then all broke out in a cheer as Buffalo Bill laughed and said:

"I fooled you all, I see; but you are not the only ones that mistook me for an Indian, pards, for I deceived both Navahoes and Boys in Black.

"Now tell me if you have any news?"

"Let me ask you, Captain Cody, if you sent the Man in Blue to Silver Thread to take the prisoner to the ranch of Judge Tremain?"

"No, Donohue, I have not seen the Man in Blue," and at the reply of Buffalo Bill the Vigilantes glanced at each other in silent amazement, for all knew that they had been tricked.

CHAPTER LII.

A WARNING VOICE.

BLANCHE VASSAR had been so warned by the judge, his wife and Myrtle not to go alone again, that she thought that she should not do so and cause worry to those who loved her.

But when Judge Tremain came back and told how Buffalo Bill had gone to the front, and the Vigilantes were encamped in the valley, while the outlaws were being hunted and were no longer the hunters, she thought she could go to her father's grave without danger.

It was a balm to her sorrow to feel that she could visit his grave and place wild flowers upon it as a token of her love for a father she had never known, yet to whom all of her sympathy and devotion went out.

She mounted her fleetest horse, buckled on her belt, in which there was a revolver, and rode away upon her mission.

In a canyon a couple of miles distant wild flowers grew in luxuriant abundance, and there she had gathered them before.

So to the canyon she went, and, dismounting, began to pick the numerous wild flowers that were to be seen all about her.

At last she had a large armful, and tying them in a bunch she mounted her horse and rode on to the graveyard.

The thought came to her of her last visit there, and how she had escaped from the outlaws through the rescue of the Man in Blue.

"It is strange how that man fascinates me."

"It cannot be love, for I regard another, whom I dare not name to myself, far more dearly than I do him; but he is one who seems to command my will, strong as I know it to be."

"What is the power he holds over me, for were he to say I should marry him I would not refuse, yet I would not wed him of my own free will."

"Buffalo Bill doubts him, I see, and he has influenced the judge even against him; but yet he cannot be a bad man, though what he is I do not know."

"The judge said that he had been rescued by Captain Cody from the outlaws, so I suppose this will make the two friends."

"Ah! there is the sacred spot I seek, and were my poor father only alive, how happy could I be, for he would guide me right, I know."

She was following the trail leading around the base of Monument Rock, when suddenly, seemingly from the clouds, came a loud voice, fairly shouting out the warning words:

"Turn back for your life!"

"Ride with all haste to the ranch, and warn the settlement to get under arms!"

"Do not remain there, Blanche Vassar, but heed me!"

The voice and words had startled her, and she had come to a sudden halt.

Then she had glanced upward toward the summit of the mountain-spur.

"She knew that voice well, and yet she called back:

"Who are you that warns me?"

"Ford Belfont, the Man in Blue."

"I am a prisoner to the Boys in Black, bound hands and feet, and they have taken my clothing to play some bold game in, I am sure."

"Here they come for they have heard my warning to you, and they sought to ambush you, for they saw you coming."

"Ride for your life, I command you!"

"And what will be your fate?"

"I know not, care not, so you escape."

"For God's sake go, Blanche, or it will be too late—they are upon me—"

His words ceased, and Blanche in turn now turned her horse about just as a loud voice shouted:

"Bring down her horse with a shot!"

With a bound the animal shot away just as the crack of a pistol was heard, and Blanche in turn now, laid her whip hard on, and the horse fairly flew over the trail on the way back to Hope Vale Ranch.

When she dashed up to the door of the cabin her horse was covered with foam and the judge, his wife and Myrtle were there listening to the story of Allan Tremain, who had just arrived from the camp of the Vigilantes, and was telling how the outlaw prisoner had been rescued by the Man in Blue.

"Yes, the Man in Blue last night rescued the outlaw from Silver Thread," said Allan, and hearing his words as she rode up, Blanche called out:

"It is false, for the Man in Blue is himself a prisoner to the outlaws as I know!"

CHAPTER LIII.

FALSELY ACCUSED.

THE words of Blanche Vassar were spoken with startling earnestness.

They surprised the judge and all, and pained Allan, for he was becoming most deeply interested in the young girl.

To have her say that his charge was false cut him to the quick, and he replied reproachfully:

"Why, Blanche, I have just come from the Vigilante camp, and the two guards arrived from Silver Thread and said that they released the prisoner to the Man in Blue, who went there last night with a note dated here at Hope Vale Ranch, and saying that the prisoner was to be given up to him."

"The note was signed 'Cody, Captain of Volunteer Vigilantes,' and it said that the Man in Blue was to bring the prisoner here for safe-keeping, and the two guards were to report in camp."

"Now father tells me that Captain Cody has not been here, no such letter was sent from here, and he has not seen the Man in

Blue, and you tell me flatly that it is false."

"No, no, Allan, do not misunderstand me, for I did not mean to say that what you had said was false, only that the Man in Blue was falsely accused."

"But he was the man who got the prisoner out of the lock-up."

"Did the men in charge know the Man in Blue personally?"

"Of that I am not certain; but they said the note stated, and I saw it and it did, that the prisoner was to be given into the keeping of the Man in Blue, and they referred to his very gorgeous costume of blue cloth and silver lace."

"And I repeat, Allan, that it was not the Man in Blue."

"How do you know, my child?" asked the judge, who saw that Blanche had something of import to make known.

"I have just seen him, or rather left him."

"The Man in Blue?"

"Yes, sir."

"But let me tell you that I disobeyed you, and started for the grave of my father."

"I wanted to put fresh flowers upon it, and I went to Wild Flower Valley for them and gathered a large bunch."

"When I was going around the base of Monument Rock a voice called out, seeming to me like a voice from the clouds, for me to turn back and fly for my life."

"I sat upon my horse half dazed, and the voice again shouted its warning, and it was the Man in Blue."

"He was a prisoner to the outlaws and in irons, and being taken to their camp."

"They had seen me coming and left him bound there, while they ran down to the pass to ambush me."

"He had called to me as my only means of escape and they hastened back to him."

"He told me they were coming, but for me to warn the settlement to get under arms, to ride for my life, and before he could say more the outlaws were upon him and I heard a deep voice cry out to drop my horse with a shot."

"That brought me back to a sense of my danger and I laid my whip upon my horse and the shot flew wild."

"Now you know why I said it was not the Man in Blue who rescued the prisoner, for let me tell you that he said that they had robbed him of his clothes, he feared to play some bold game in them, and that is just what some one of the outlaws did do in the rescue of the prisoner."

The story of Blanche was listened to with painful interest, and Allan hastened to say:

"I did misunderstand you, Blanche, and it does seem that the Man in Blue is after all falsely accused."

"I shall return at once to the Vigilante camp and report what you say, and I hope that I will find that Buffalo Bill has returned, for we are getting anxious about him."

"I will return with you, my son, at least a part of the way, for this warning of the Man in Blue must not go unheeded and the settlers must be called to arms," said the judge, while he added anxiously:

"I do hope that Buffalo Bill has returned, for with him in command there need be no fear of the outlaws."

"I will be ready in a short while, Allan."

"And I, too, for I go with you, as the Vigilantes will need their mascot," was the determined response of Blanche Vassar.

CHAPTER LIV.

THE ALARM.

KNOWING that Blanche was in earnest, and understanding her determined nature, Judge Tremain offered no resistance to her accompanying his son and himself to the Vigilante camp, while Allan said:

"Yes, it would be well for you to go, Blanche, and tell your own story of the warning."

It was not long after that the judge and Allan rode away, with Blanche riding between them, while a couple of cowboys followed to branch off at different trails and give the alarm through the valley.

Pacing the places on the way, and there were several of them, the judge halted long

enough to tell the settler living there to get ready for action, and to send to those nearest to him to do the same, all dwelling in the upper part of the valley to rally at Hope Vale Ranch, while those about Silver Thread would meet there, and the dwellers at the lower end of the settlement would rendezvous at the home of a prominent rancher.

In this way the news spread quickly through the valley, that the new band of Vigilantes had taken the field, and that an alarm had been sent to the settlers calling them to rally and be ready at certain points to obey orders sent by the Chief of the Volunteer Guards of Silver Thread.

Thus, by the time that Judge Tremain, Allan and Blanche rode into the Vigilante camp, the alarm had spread over one-half of the valley.

Buffalo Bill had returned, as has been shown, in the disguise of a Navaho chief; but he had quickly gone to the creek and gotten off his paint, cast aside his feathers and Indian costume, and came out once more like himself.

Calling the Vigilantes about him, he told them of his scouting expedition and its result.

He was modest in all that he said of himself, but told how he had gone to the ranch of the Man in Blue, and had followed there the tracks of the horse ridden by that most mysterious individual.

"That I made no mistake," he continued, "in the tracks, I saw in the corral the very horse, and he showed that he had been hard ridden."

"The man at the cabin, however, told me that his boss was not there, and had not been for several days, and that he was alone there."

"Still, I knew that he went to the cabin and consulted with some one in hiding there, before he could do what I requested of him."

"I am sure, too, that I heard voices in the cabin."

"When I left there I felt that I was to be followed, so I bought a horse, took one trail, turned into another, rode desperately hard, and reaching the base of the range, turned the animal loose, while I came on foot over the mountain."

Then the visit to the Hermit Avenger was made known, the rigging up as an Indian chief and capture of the outlaw sentinel, and what followed.

"Now you tell me that the Man in Blue quietly rides into Silver Thread and hands over a note pretending to have been written by me, with orders as to what to do with the prisoner."

"Have you that note?"

The Vigilante who had it handed it over with the remark:

"We knew that he had brought the prisoner there the night before, and we supposed he was your friend, Captain Cody, so naturally obeyed what we believed to be a written order from you."

"I do not blame you, pard, though this is not even an attempt at forging my handwriting; but then it was a bold trick played to win, and it won."

"Mr. Tremain, you say, has gone to the Hope Vale Ranch?"

"Yes, sir."

"He will not find the prisoner there, or the Man in Blue either, for the belief grows upon me more and more that he is more than he professes to be, and he must be found and made to explain to our satisfaction."

"How long did you say that Mr. Tremain had been gone when I arrived?"

"Something over two hours, Captain Cody, and Allan is a hard rider, so, if he returns at once, should be back early this afternoon, as he will get a fresh mount at the ranch," said Doctor Donohue.

CHAPTER LV.

THE FAIR PLEADER

As Dallas Donohue had predicted, Allan Tremain returned to the Vigilante camp early in the afternoon, and he was accompanied by his father and Blanche.

Buffalo Bill hastily advanced to meet them, and as he lifted Blanche from the saddle, he asked, with a twinkle of the eye:

"Well, Miss Blanche, how is our Man in Blue now?"

"In great trouble, Captain Cody, if not dead by this time."

There was something in the manner of the girl, and her words, that caused the scout to look fixedly at her and say:

"Then you have news of him?"

"He saved me from capture again this morning, Captain Cody, and I fear was severely dealt with for doing so."

Buffalo Bill gave a low whistle and glanced at the doctor and Allan, while Judge Tremain said:

"Blanche came with us, Captain Cody, to make her own report of an adventure this morning, and which she told us of just as my son came with the information that this mysterious Man in Blue had rescued the outlaw prisoner from Silver Thread through a pretended letter from you."

"Yes, judge, it was a nervy and clever trick, boldly and successfully executed."

"Doctor Donohue will tell you how well the outlaw played 'possum, pretending to be most seriously wounded, to in the end be able to make his escape."

"Now I took the trail of the horse ridden by the Man in Blue, and you shall hear with what result."

In his quiet manner Buffalo Bill then told the whole story of his following the trail, his visit to the ranch of the Man in Blue, his purchase of the horse and deserting it, his going to the Hermit Nemesis and getting him to rig him up as an Indian, yet not once saying a word to compromise Nemesis Nat as one who knew the outlaws, and then the story to the end of the trail, when, upon arriving in camp, he discovered that the prisoner had been rescued by the Man in Blue.

The judge, Allan and Doctor Donohue all glanced at Blanche as the scout ended his story with the words:

"And now Miss Blanche tells me that the Man in Blue again saved her from capture this morning."

Blanche seemed a little staggered at the scout's story, for it did look as though he had struck a clue against the Man in Blue and was following it to success.

But she said:

"Circumstantial evidence, Captain Cody, would show that this Man in Blue was the guilty one, that he was leagued with the outlaws, had gone to his ranch, lay in hiding there while you were present, and then, coming to Silver Thread, had rescued the prisoner, who was the very man, Allan tells me, who kidnapped me at my father's grave."

And her voice quivered as she referred to her father.

But quickly recovering herself she said, with a smile:

"Now, as the judge says, listen to the argument of the defense."

"You deemed that you had discovered the Man in Blue to be leading a double life when you found his horse's tracks going back to Silver Thread with the outlaw rescuers of the prisoner when he was first taken there."

"Instead, you found him flying for his life from them, having made his escape, his hands being ironed and his feet bound under his horse."

"So Allan tells me."

"It is true, Miss Blanche."

"Convinced that you had wronged him, you—"

"Pardon me, no, I am not yet convinced, Miss Blanche, but will frankly admit my error and let the Man in Blue have his revenge upon me, if you give me proof that I am wrong."

"Very well, I'll give you the proof."

"I will not say, then, that you were convinced of your error, but that you went on with the Man in Blue alone on the trail."

"Yes."

"You have told us how you parted company with him after the warning of the Hermit Nemesis, and instead of turning back to camp you still followed his trail."

"In the end it led you to the ranch of the Man in Blue, and yet you cannot assert positively that he was there, while we know that last night it was said that he rescued an outlaw from the Silver Thread lock up, and this morning he was a prisoner of the outlaws, in irons, and with a party taking him to their retreat."

"That party saw me going along the trail, and, leaving him bound, sought to ambush and capture me, which he prevented,

while the outlaws rushed back, thwarted, to vent their fury upon him."

"Now, Captain Cody, is he guilty?"

CHAPTER LVI.

NOT TO BE CAUGHT NAPPING.

BUFFALO BILL had listened with deepest attention to the story of Blanche.

There was just a shade of triumph in the fair pleader's voice when she asked the scout to say whether the Man in Blue was guilty or not, after he had heard her story.

The judge seemed convinced, Doctor Donohue and Allan Tremain were now assured that the scout was on the wrong track in following up the Man in Blue as being an ally of the outlaws, and all waited patiently for his answer to the pointed question of Blanche.

It came in his quiet way of talking when much moved, and he said:

"You are a fair pleader for a friend, Miss Blanche, a good reasoner, and the judge will admit that the evidence is against my theory of guilt."

"But I should say that, though I did not see the Man in Blue at his ranch, I feel certain that he was there."

"You did not see the Man in Blue, but you heard him call to you, but that is not proof that he was ironed as he said he was and a prisoner."

"Why did he do what he did, then?"

"To curry further favor with Miss Vassar by a pretended second rescue of her."

"But the other voice I heard."

"He might have had men with him, and I shall find out."

"How?"

"I shall go to the scene."

"But you admit that he escaped from the outlaws when you rescued him?"

"It appeared so at least, Miss Blanche."

"You still doubt the Man in Blue?"

"I do not wish to appear stubborn, but I must confess that I do."

"I have had much dealings with just such men, and they are cunning as foxes, cruel as jackals and up to every dodge to carry their point."

"You say that the Man in Blue called to you that the outlaws had taken his clothing, and he feared would perpetrate some bold game under the guise of being him."

"That would account for the man who rescued the prisoner, for he doubtless wore the clothes of the Man in Blue."

"Now, Miss Blanche, I have neglected to ascertain from the two Vigilantes who saw him, just the style of man he was."

"Mr. Kent, please call those two men here."

And, as the officer left to obey, Buffalo Bill continued:

"Now that very calling out that he had had his clothes taken from him, in my mind, showed a weak point against the Man in Blue."

"To me it looked as though something had been done that he wished to prepare you for."

The two Vigilantes came up then with Kent, and the scout said:

"Did you particularly notice the Man in Blue last night?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you ever seen him before?"

Neither had that he remembered.

"Describe the man, please."

"He was mounted upon a black horse, a fine animal, with Mexican outfit, and he was dressed in blue, even to his sombrero, and his suit and hat were embroidered with silver thread and lace."

"And his face?"

"He seemed not to wish us to get a good look at it, sir, for he constantly turned from us."

"What kind of a voice had he?"

"A very fine voice, for we both spoke of it after he went away."

"Did you see his meeting with the prisoner?"

"Oh yes, sir."

"Did they appear to have met before?"

"It struck us both that they had, for the Man in Blue said:

"Well, I've got you again, my man."

The men were told they could go, and then Buffalo Bill said:

"Judge, when it was found that the prisoner had gone with the Man in Blue, Doctor

Donohue at once sent two of the best scouts among the band to track the two men from the lock-up.

"They started upon the trail, and have just returned to camp, so we will hear what they have to say."

The men were sent for, and they reported that they had had no difficulty in following the trail, and that they had tracked the two horses to the vicinity of Monument Rock, near the settlement burying-ground, but fearing to go further, they had returned to camp.

"That was right, men."

"Now, judge, will you not return home and take command of the settlers in the upper part of the valley, rendezvousing upon your ranch?"

"Mr. Kent will go to the lower part of the valley to command the settlers there, while Mr. Tremain will remain in charge of the Vigilantes here in camp, and of those who are to assemble at the village."

"Each of you will know where to send a courier for reinforcements, if needed, and also to me, if I am wanted, for I shall take the trail again alone, and my camp will be in a blind canyon just back of a tall, lightning-riven tree."

"If I am not there, a man will be there who can quickly find me."

"There may be no danger of an outlaw raid, but we must not be caught napping, and prepared for them, we can defeat them."

"Now, judge, I ride back your way as far as the trail to Monument Rock, for I wish to examine the trail left there by the Man in Blue."

CHAPTER LVII.

A LONE TRAIL.

THE arrangements having been made for the different bands of settlers to rendezvous under the commanders named by Buffalo Bill, several couriers were sent from among the Vigilantes to let every one in the settlement be placed upon his guard against danger.

The band of Vigilantes were to remain in camp just where they were, as the best place from which they could move quickly to any point they might be needed.

They were now in full force, save the couriers just sent off, and they would soon return.

Doctor Donohue was anxious to be of service in the field, as well as in his profession, but the scout told him to remain with the Vigilantes, where he could be more easily found when wanted.

Though the settlers could turn out a fighting force of nearly two hundred men, so demoralized and cowed had they become by the acts of the outlaws that they never rallied promptly to strike back at their foes.

But, with a new commander in the field, and over two-score Vigilantes bold enough to volunteer for service under him, the faint hearts felt their courage restored to them, while the reports that the Boys in Black had been twice met by the Volunteer Vigilantes and defeated, caused a most liberal number of the settlers to flock to the appointed rendezvous at the call to arms.

When he rode away from camp, to again start upon a lone trail, Buffalo Bill was accompanied by Judge Tremain and Blanche.

It would be night before the Hope Vale Ranch would be reached, and the judge urged the scout to accompany them home and remain until morning.

"No, thanks, judge, I must be on the field at dawn, for I wish to see just how many were with the Man in Blue and which way they went."

"When I have done this, I will go to the canyon I spoke of, and there scout around on foot; so if you need me you will know where to find me, while, I do not mind telling you and Miss Blanche, the one who will be there with me is the Hermit Avenger, Nemesis Nat."

"I feel better now at your going, Cody, for that man knows every foot of this country, and is afraid of nothing, while he must know the retreats of these outlaws."

And both the judge and Blanche grasped the scout's hand warmly at parting and went

on their way at a rapid gallop, for night was close at hand and they had some miles to ride.

Buffalo Bill watched them out of sight and then turned off on the trail that would take him straight to the burying-ground of the settlement.

"I can get a good night's rest there, for no one will disturb my slumbers in that place," mused the scout as he rode on.

It was half an hour after midnight when he rode into the burying-ground, rudely fenced in with logs.

He staked his horse out to feed on the rich grass there, and, eating a cold supper, wrapped his blankets about him and lay down to sleep within ten feet of the grave of Carl Vassar.

Before the dawn broke he was awake, wholly refreshed by a good night's sleep, and determined to take his breakfast later, he rode on up to the spot on the range where Blanche had told him the Man in Blue had been when he hailed her.

When the dawn broke he was upon the scene, and looking about carefully for a trail, he soon found one.

Taking a view of the surrounding country through his glass, Buffalo Bill saw that not a moving object was in sight.

Afar off he beheld Hope Vale Ranch, but all looked quiet there and the cattle had been corralled, for none were visible on the plains.

His own quarters, Solace Lodge, was visible, but all there too was serene.

But the scout seemed most interested in the trail he had discovered on the top of Monument Rock and leading to it.

He marked well the trail's coming to and leaving the place, and he studied it with a most critical eye.

At last he seemed to have satisfied himself with what he had discovered, and, descending to where he had left his horse, he built a fire among the rocks, cooked breakfast, and then went on his way once more.

It was just noon when he rode into the canyon near the cavern home of Nemesis Nat, and when he met the Hermit Avenger said, earnestly:

"Old man, I need your aid, for I've struck it rich."

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE MEETING OF THE MASKERS.

THE tocsin had been sounded, figuratively speaking, that called together the outlaw band known as the Boys in Black.

Whoever and whatever they were, they had been notified, in the way that was their wont, that "the faithful" were to assemble on a certain night at a central retreat of the band, and most important would be the reason for calling them together.

The band of outlaws was a large one, when its hangers on were taken into consideration, for it had spies in the mining camps, among the cowboys on the ranches, in the farming settlement of Silver Thread, along the stage-line trail to Trail End City, and especially in the latter place.

With but few exceptions, a man each in mining camp, settlement or valley ranch, no one but the workers of the band knew their secret retreat.

The "workers" were the ones known as the Boys in Black, and though the outlaws in one way and another connected with the band might number nearly a hundred, they, the men who bore the hardships and dangers, were just half a hundred, and these were under the chief known to his men as "Captain Black," which the band changed to "The Black Captain," as his horse, clothing, mask and gloves were as black as ink.

This same captain of the outlaws was known as a man born to command.

He was a strict disciplinarian, merciless to an offender, generous and kind to those who did their duty as he set it down for them.

By very few of the men had his face ever been seen, and these were known as the "Chosen Few," for they were his especial Guard, they doing the most lawless work, the hardest riding, and getting the lion's share of all booty taken.

These, the Captain's Guard, were the ones who would hold up a coach, raid a ranch, or do any special work, and they were

trained under an eagle eye and by a hand of iron.

They were the couriers, too, to call a meeting of the maskers, or to send with orders from retreat to retreat.

As long as the band had been doing well, there was not a shadow of discontent shown by any one, but when booty and gold were scarce, complaints were made, and those who made them were surely marked as doomed, for in some way they mysteriously disappeared, until Captain Black's will was law, and no man in the band knew whether his best pard was not a spy upon him.

With the element that comprised his band, the Black Captain could only win by the severest discipline and a decided show of cruelty.

His treatment of his foes was an example of what his men might expect from one who was wholly without mercy.

The fiat having gone out that a special meeting of the maskers was called, to meet at a certain rendezvous, there began to drop in at the retreat from early morning a number of men of all kinds, sizes and conditions.

Had one stood there to study faces and character, he would have said, in watching them pass in going to the secret rendezvous, that he could have picked out one or more men among the gang to commit any crime in the catalogue of criminal deeds.

They were men that might have had a mother to love them in infancy, but not after they had begun to prefer crime to virtue.

They were men of the cunning fox type, of the sneaking coyote kind, of the ravenous mountain-wolf stripe, and so on to be compared through the catalogue of meanest animals.

If there was one who had enough honor left in him to do a good deed, the face of not one of those going into the retreat revealed the fact.

It was most assuredly a gathering of the clans of crime, and any and all of them were ready to strike a blow to the heart for gold.

Though only the Captain's Guard wore the masks and sable clothing that gave them their name of the Boys in Black, all who came to the council affected a mask, so that not a face was visible among those who had assembled.

The meeting was in a deep canyon, with wall-like rocks rising a hundred feet on either side, and with large wood-fires lighting up the motley band that had assembled at the call of their chief.

Business had not been brisk of late, so the whole force, with few exceptions had turned out in mask, and it was very well that they had thus shielded their crime-branded brows from even the eyes of their fellows.

The meeting was not to last long, and afterward the men went their separate ways.

They were called together for a purpose, and the chief wanted to see their faces and set them again upon the trail like bloodhounds.

Such was the meeting of the maskers.

But this meeting was one that was more important than any that had been held, for it was for protection and revenge as well as for the love of gold guiltily gained.

But little did the masked crooks of the mountains dream that in that meeting in the wild canyon, that among the masks that shielded their faces, there was one which, if seen and known, would have sent terror to their hearts, for in their midst was one uninvited guest.

CHAPTER LIX.

A DESPERATE RESOLVE.

"BUFFALO BILL, do you intend to commit suicide?"

"Oh, no, pard, if I understand that suicide is the intentional killing of one's self."

"Are you tired of life, Bill?"

"You bet I am not."

"You do not wish to pass in your chips?"

"Not until duty demands it, Nemesis Nat."

"Then why do you do such a reckless, foolhardy, desperate act, Buffalo Bill?"

"For the good that may come out of it, Pard Nat."

"Good to others and death to yourself."

"It may be; but I have been soldiering and scouting long enough to know that a soldier and scout belongs to others, his life is at the beck and call of those who wish to sacrifice him that they may live and prosper."

"Mark you, Nemesis Nat, I am not grumbling, for I like the life I lead, only I wish you to understand that I must act for the good of others no matter what the sacrifice to self may be."

"You follow your creed to kill, avenge your loved ones, and add the scalps of Navahoes to your string, and you daily risk life in this work, which you deem a duty."

"I am here to keep safe the lives of innocent men, women and children, to prevent their being robbed of their hard-earned riches, and I must risk life to do so."

"Now, you are answered why I shall go to this meeting of the outlaw maskers."

"You came here and asked me to aid you, saying that you had struck it rich, and I said that I would do so."

"I told you that the clans of crooks were gathering in larger numbers than ever before, gathering for a council to arrange a cruel war upon the settlers, to avenge the numbers slain by the people of Silver Thread Valley, and frighten them thus into allowing themselves to be murdered and robbed without resistance."

"I have told you that these clans were doubtless to meet in the Devil's Canyon, and that all went there masked, and now you tell me that you will play outlaw and go there also masked to learn just what will be done at the meeting, to spot those you can, and learn enough to counterplot against them, and I tell you, Buffalo Bill, that of all the risks of life you have taken, you are now about to take the most desperate."

"I don't see it that way, Nemesis Nat, for if all are masked, I will not be known."

"On account of your scruples about doing aught to harm those outlaws, to whom you owe your life, and who have been kind to you, I do not ask you to aid me."

"See here, Bill Cody, I am not wedded to the outlaws beyond a divorce."

"I simply say that I will not betray their chief, that I will not, by my act, lead to the gallows those among them who have been kind to me."

"They trust me, and I must not betray, though I feel that they should be checked in their red deeds, that they should never be allowed to go on in their life of crime, death and destruction."

"Only to-day did I see their chief and urge him against further bloodshed and robbery."

"But he laughed at me, and frankly confessed, feeling that I, like himself, was an outcast, that his men were to meet to-morrow night and arrange for a blow that would be most deadly."

"You say that you are going to this meeting of the maskers?"

"I am going, Nemesis Nat, if I die for it," was the determined reply of the scout.

The Hermit Avenger was silent for a minute, and then said:

"See here, Buffalo Bill, I owe you more than I do any living man, and as you are determined to go to this outlaws' gathering, it is my duty to save you if I can."

"To do this, as I have myself been to them, but, as I know you will believe me, never as an outlaw, I will tell you just how to enter the canyon, give you a secret word that will protect you if suspected, and also instruct you in other ways so that you may run less chances of being discovered and burned alive at the stake, for the Boys in Black will out-Injun Injun in their cruelty to Buffalo Bill if they find him out."

"I have no doubt of that, Nemesis Nat, but go I shall, and I shall doubtless owe my life to what you tell me."

"Now I wish to write a letter to-morrow, and I am going to ask you to go and deliver it to-morrow night at the home of Judge Tremain, for he knows that I was coming to you."

"You need let no one else see you—will you do this for me?"

"I will, Bill, I will."

CHAPTER LX.

THE SCOUT'S LETTER.

THE scout slept as soundly that night in the Hermit Avenger's cavern as though the thought of the dread ordeal before him held no place in his slumbers.

After breakfast in the morning the Hermit Avenger asked:

"Are you still determined upon your resolve of last night, Bill, desperate as it is?"

"More than ever, Nemesis Nat, now that I have slept upon it."

"All right; I can say no more."

"That's right."

"Now I will write that letter to Judge Tremain, and to prove to you that I am doing nothing underhand to compromise you I will read it to you."

"My dear Bill, I never would suspect you of an underhand act even to a foe!" said Nemesis Nat warmly.

Then the scout wrote with pencil and paper the following letter:

"MY DEAR JUDGE TREMAIN:—

"This letter is sent to you by one whom I can trust with my life, and he is to remain in the Blind Canyon, which was to be my retreat, to receive any message that may be sent there for me."

"I found a trail on Monument Rock that I deem most important, and it convinced me that I was on the right track."

"Please notify the separate bands of settlers to go into camp right where they are, to keep their horses in the best condition, and themselves ready for a quick move, with supplies on hand for several days' use."

"I will notify you in time just when to move, but kindly have couriers ready to dispatch with all speed to the other commands when you get word from me, and have them do the same, as I cannot now tell just which one I will be able to reach, or when the lightning will strike."

"It may be several days, perhaps a week, but the outlaws will move soon, and only by being acquainted with their intentions, and the trails they intend to follow, can we strike them a crushing blow."

"It is to ascertain this that I now start on the trail, so please convince the settlers of the importance of keeping together, post the leaders only, and let no man leave camp, save the couriers you send on messages, and you must be sure of them."

"With respect,

"Yours,

"B. B."

This letter was read to Nemesis Nat, who said:

"Yes, Bill, I'll take it, and it is not too strong."

"In fact I'll see the judge myself, and impress upon him that he must know his men that he trusts."

"I'll be off as soon as I have rigged you out for your really desperate work, and then I'll hang out at the Blind Canyon, awaiting for any communication that may come there for you."

"If it is important enough I will come on to the Devil's Canyon and look you up, as I wish to know you, in your rig to go there in, and you can recognize me as I wear no mask. I have nothing to hide."

"If you run across a Navaho on your trail, just kill him for my sake."

The old Hermit then got out from his storehouse of odds and ends a different suit for Cody to wear, the dress and rough boots of a miner, slouch hat and all.

The scout had already a mask, such as the Boys in Black wore but he dared not go in a black garb, such as the Chosen Few wore.

Then the Hermit Avenger told him just what trails to take, and what to do, with a great many particulars regarding the band and meeting of maskers that would be of great benefit to him.

He also gave him the passwords of the band, and told him the circumstances under which they should be used.

The scout also changed the saddle and bridle he always used, for the Hermit had several on hand.

Thus equipped, Buffalo Bill was ready for his very perilous venture, and shaking hands with the Hermit Avenger, he said:

"You know what to do for me, Pard Nat, I'll be back before long."

feel more and more like a cat with nine lives, so I'll turn up all right."

"Good-by and take care of yourself."

"I'm only a rough old pine-knot, Bill, ready to go; but you are young, with the world's trail before you to fame and fortune, and you are the one to take care of yourself."

"God bless you, my boy, and good-by," and the voice of the old man grew husky with emotion.

CHAPTER LXI.

THE LETTER DELIVERED.

NEMESIS NAT was not a man to spare himself, and he was wont to say that he could start any day across the mountains and by night break down a relay of three horses.

He knew every cut, canyon and trail of the mountains, and by climbing up a cliff, or down one, he could cut many a mile off of a trail.

By climbing a tree against a cliff also he could lessen distance, and he had in several places made dug-outs, which he could descend or ascend the streams with, and cross them, thus causing, by his wonderfully quick movements from distant points to other places, the Indians to believe he could be in two spots at the same time.

Having left the scout going on his dangerous mission to the camp of the masked outlaws, Nemesis Nat started for the home of Judge Tremain.

To have taken the trail around, as a horseman would go, he would have had over forty miles to go over; but instead he cut across by the paths he knew so well and the distance was lessened by one half.

Nemesis Nat took the way by Monument Rock and the settlers' burying place.

What the scout had told him of his discovery there had caused him to also wish to investigate.

Arriving there he took a hasty glance at the trail on the ridge, paused by the grave of Carl Vassar as he went along, and saw that the loving hand of Blanche had kept it covered with wild-flowers.

An hour after he walked quietly up to the cabin home of Hope Vale, paying no attention to the savage dogs that came rushing toward him, for to see a visitor on foot coming to the ranch they were not accustomed to.

The judge hastened out to protect his visitor, but found there was no need of it as the dogs found their master in the Hermit Avenger and a word of command from him had cowed them.

The judge gazed with real admiration upon the tall form, noble face and white locks and beard of the man who only lived to avenge his loved ones.

He had heard much of the strange man but never had seen him before, and Buffalo Bill's story of him had interested the judge greatly in him.

"I believe I am welcoming one known as the Hermit Avenger, for I do not know your name?" the judge said in his hearty way.

"Nemesis Nat they call me, sir; but my name is Nathaniel Norcross, or was away back in the days when I had use for one."

"You are Judge Tremain, I take it?"

There was a calm dignity about the Hermit that impressed the judge most favorably, as also his wife, Myrtle and Blanche, who sat on the piazza when he came up.

The judge introduced the ladies, and bade his visitor be seated, adding:

"We will have dinner soon, and you shall have a chance to freshen up; but sit down and rest awhile first."

The Hermit gazed about him, while the fire in his eyes was softened by a look of inexpressible sadness, and he said:

"I am not fit for ladies' society, Judge Tremain, for it is twenty years since I have been in their presence, and the last time I was under a roof, it was just such an afternoon as this, and in my own home."

"The next day the home was a ruin, my loved ones were dead, murdered by the Navahoes; so ever since I have been an Avenger—no, I am not fit for the company of ladies. No, madam, my hand is too red-hued for you to touch, though, thank God, it is an honest hand! only I have dyed it with Indian blood in my insatiate love for revenge, to avenge my loved darlings."

There were tears in the eyes of Mrs. Tremain and the young girls, and Judge Tremain coughed to keep back the choking emotion that welled up in his throat.

It was Blanche who broke the silence.

"You have done right to avenge those you loved, sir."

"My father was murdered, and never will I be happy until I feel that he has been avenged."

"None of us here blame you; we have all suffered too much for that, and we respect your misfortunes and give you our sympathy in your sorrows."

"Well said, Blanche."

"You have expressed just what I wished to," cried the judge, while the Hermit Avenger's face lighted up, and he said:

"They call you Blanche; then you are the one whom the outlaws attempted to kidnap?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do not trust yourself again alone, for you would have no more mercy shown you than if you fell into the hands of the Navahoes; but this scene of home, and the kind welcome I have received, caused me to forget that I came here on a mission, to give you this letter, sir, from one of Nature's noblemen, one upon whom God has set the seal of perfect manhood—Buffalo Bill," and the Hermit Avenger handed to Judge Tremain the letter given him by the scout.

CHAPTER LXII.

THE HERMIT AVENGER'S RETURN.

THE Hermit Avenger was more than pleased with the welcome given him, and while the judge read the scout's letter the three ladies did all they could to make him feel how welcome he was.

Mrs. Tremain led him to the guests' room, and old Uncle Toby, the negro man of all-work, was sent there to see to his wants.

Having brushed the dust of travel off, and refreshed himself, the Hermit felt better and returned to the piazza to find the judge and the ladies discussing the scout's letter.

"You know the contents of this letter, Mr. Norcross?"

"Yes, judge."

"I hope that our daring friend Cody has not gone into another deadly undertaking, as I fear he has."

"Yes, I regret to say that he has gone upon the most perilous work of his life, sir, but I dare not say what it is where walls may have ears."

"The truth is, Judge Tremain, that this outlaw element pervades the very air of this frontier, and even in your beautiful valley homes there are spies who are allies to the outlaws."

"My lips are sealed so that I cannot speak out, or act, for gratitude chains me to silence; but I will say here, as I feel that I can do so, that William Cody has gone to the outlaw camp in disguise, to attend a secret meeting, at which plans will be arranged for a rush upon this valley of over three score lawless horsemen."

"Buffalo Bill will learn their plans, if he is not recognized and put to death by torture, and my advice to you, sir, is to obey implicitly the instructions of his letter."

"Go yourself to see the leaders of the Vigilante and settler bands, and let them know how important quick action is to success."

"Let them keep their couriers, their trusted men only, ready to act at once when the time comes, and above all let them allow no man to leave camp save the couriers."

"If any man insists upon doing so, kill him as I would a Navahoe, for he is not to be trusted in any way."

"The sooner you are ready to start on your rounds, sir, the better, and do not spare yourself or horseflesh."

"I will be at the Blind Canyon, awaiting orders from Cody, or messengers from you."

"I have been led to say more than I had intended, and now I must be silent, for I will not betray openly or secret, those I am bound to by the ties of gratitude; but I long for, hope for, pray for the successful wiping out of that lawless band without aid or mercy."

"If he is not killed, Buffalo Bill will be the man who will utterly crush the Boys in Black, as they deserve to be, and bring peace upon your beautiful valley of homes."

The Hermit Avenger spoke earnestly, and the judge at once ordered his horse gotten ready, and Blanche insisted upon accompanying him, but this he would not allow.

Dinner was announced then, and the Hermit Avenger enjoyed for the first time, since he had sat at his own board, the pleasure of eating as a gentleman.

He relished his meal, talked well, but altogether of the far past, and when Blanche asked him if he knew the Man in Blue, answered quietly:

"Oh, yes, I have met him."

"Can you tell me anything about him, sir?"

"I will leave that for Buffalo Bill to do, lady."

The judge offered a horse to the Hermit to return on, but though it was at first refused, he accepted the offer when Blanche said:

"You might need him, and would, if Buffalo Bill returned with his horse used up."

"You are right, miss, and I will accept your kind offer, Judge Tremain."

They rode out of the yard together, the judge, with a cowboy as an escort, and the Hermit, but they went separate ways soon after, the Hermit Avenger returning by the trail leading to Monument Rock.

The judge rode rapidly on his mission to visit the other commands, and had sent a messenger to have his own men come to his ranch at once and go into camp.

He was determined to do as the Hermit had said, spare neither himself or horseflesh in carrying out the wishes of Buffalo Bill.

And Nemesis Nat, with this same aim in view, hurried back to his post at the Blind Canyon, arriving soon after nightfall.

CHAPTER LXIII.

A UNINVITED GUEST.

BUFFALO BILL realized to the fullest extent all that he was doing in going to the camp of the Boys in Black.

He knew that only the black mask lay between him and recognition, which meant death.

He had gone only a few miles when he saw two horsemen turn into the trail ahead of him.

Neither was dressed in black, or rode black horses, but they wore the mask that concealed completely their identity.

"Here is a chance for company, such as it is," said the scout, and he hastened to overtake the two men ahead of him.

They turned quickly upon hearing him approach, and seeing that he was "one of them" slackened rein.

"Ho pard! bound for ther camp, o' course" said Buffalo Bill, as he joined them.

"You bet we is, and I'm thiakin' thar'll be a big meetin'."

"Hope so; for I guesses that the chief means ter play a big game, and, from all I larn, he holds a handful o' trumps," said the scout.

"Yas, and it's time, for money hain't been over-plentiful o' late, and I'm savin' mine ter git a chance ter go back East some day and cut a swell."

"Stretch a rope, yer means, Tom," growled his comrade.

"Shet up, won't yer, fer who wants ter hear talk o' ropes. Buck?" was the reply.

And Buffalo Bill mentally jotted down the names of "Buck" and "Tom" as pards of his.

He got on smoothly with the two, sharing his tobacco and a pull at a small flask, and found out all he wished to know about the two, while he made himself "solid" with them as simply "Bill," they not suspecting how much there was in a name.

Armed with two pards who knew the ropes and from whom he was learning much that was useful information, Buffalo Bill considered himself in luck, and at sunset rode into the Devil's Canyon.

Half a hundred men were already there, and the scout saw that about a third of them would remove their masks at will, while others kept them on constantly.

He saw, too, miners he had met before, cowboys, a settler or two, and, prominent among them, and who seemed to be a man in authority, was the Giant Sport of Trail End City, Circus Sam, who had sent three hirelings out upon the track of himself, Allan Tremain and Doctor Donohue, and which trio, it will be remembered, had come to grief.

It did not take the scout long to discover that Circus Sam was an officer of the outlaw band, and though he had rigged himself up in black, he wore his mask hanging about his neck, as though he was anxious to let every one know just who he was.

There were other members dropping in constantly, and the Giant Sport gave orders that all should stake their horses out, form messes, and go regularly into camp, as the stay would not be as was usually the case for only a few hours, but for several days, as the chief was planning a grand move.

Buffalo Bill sought out his two traveling pards, Buck and Tom, and, as he had plenty of supplies, suggested that they get one other and mess together.

This was done, and the scout circulated freely about the camps, taking notes and allowing nothing to escape his observation.

It was just midnight when the bugle sounded, calling the outlaws to assemble, and Circus Sam went about announcing that the chief, Captain Black, had arrived.

Buffalo Bill went with the rest to the meeting-place, and soon the chief appeared, clad in black and masked.

He was attended by several men who were similarly attired, only the chief had a red cord about his black sombrero, and a scarlet sash about his waist.

Whether he was white, black or red skin could not be told, so thoroughly was he masked.

In a voice distinct and with a ring to its rich tones, he called the meeting of the Maskers to order, and then for an hour told of his plans, their successes, reverses, and the plot for the future, to avenge their dead comrades and to strike at the settlers in a way that would demoralize them.

He told of the new stage line that was to be put on the next week to Silver Thread, and showed that he had plotted to make each member of the band a rich man.

When at last the plans had all been told, the chief said that in the morning at nine each man was to assemble at his quarters and sign the new roll of the outlaws, to write down their names in the "Black Book," as he expressed it.

Buffalo Bill did not return immediately to his camp with the three outlaws.

He was seen hanging about the chief, and just as Tom, Buck, and the other man were turning in he came back and said:

"Well, pards, I'm in hard luck, for the chief sends me off on a night ride, and a long one, and I'm fagged out now."

"You better keep my grub, as I won't need it."

"I don't envy you, Pard Bill," said Tom, and the others also gave him their sympathy, and he said:

"I'll meet you on the raid, pard."

Then he was off, and, as no guards were kept, for none were supposed to be needed there, he went to his horse and slipped away in the darkness.

It was just half-an-hour before dawn, but he knew that the outlaws would sleep late, and he did not believe that he would be missed, for he well knew that his name was not down on the outlaw roll, and never would be written in the Black Book.

Suddenly he heard hoof falls behind him, and quietly he drew into the shelter of a thicket.

A moment after a party of five horsemen dashed by, and one was talking as they did so.

Standing with his hand upon the neck of his horse to prevent his neighing, Buffalo Bill heard the voice of the one in the lead, and just what he said as he passed.

"That is the chief's voice, and he goes ahead to prepare the way."

"So do I. I was an uninvited guest but I fared very well."

And soon after the scout rode on, and when day dawned he was following the trail of the chief and his Boys in Black.

CHAPTER LXIV.

THE FAIR COURIER.

BUFFALO BILL followed the trail of the outlaw chief and his comrades until he felt sure where it would lead, and then he pressed on as rapidly as he dared to the Blind Canyon.

He had had no rest, but that did not matter, and his desire was to spare his horse all he could, until he reached the canyon, when he knew that the Hermit Avenger could make as good time as any animal could in bearing a message, and the scout felt that he had much to make known.

It was afternoon when he reached the Blind Canyon, and the Hermit Avenger was on the watch and called out:

"Ho, Pard Bill, then you thought better of it after all, and I'm mighty glad that you did."

"Thought better of what, pard?"

"Going to Devil's Canyon."

"I have just returned from there. I overtook company on the way, attended the meeting last night at midnight, heard the chief's full plans of action and followed his trail to within ten miles back, where he branched off, but I know where he is going, so that is all right."

"I am back again, Nemesis Nat, was not even suspected, and am now ready for the work in hand which is to be to-morrow night just before dawn, the first strike being made at Hope Vale Ranch by the chief and his special band of Boys in Black, while Band Two attacks Silver Thread City, and Band Three sweeps around to come in at the lower end of the valley."

"The ranches will then be raided, then the mines, and with their booty the outlaws were to go into hiding and await the result, and the starting of the stage-line from Trail End City."

"Buffalo Bill, you have done wonders."

"But did you see the chief unmasked?"

"No, and there was no need to do so, as I know him."

"You are sure?"

"Perfectly."

"I have nothing to say, I will raise no hand to save, will let you carry out your destiny, which I feel is to crush this serpent of sin that is devastating this fair and dotting it with the graves of good and brave men."

"Now, what will you do?"

"Await until night, when my horse will be rested, and then go to the Hope Vale Ranch."

"You need rest yourself, so take it and when you wish to go I have a fresh horse for you, and a splendid animal he is; but you look haggard."

"I am hungry, pard, and a trifle sleepy."

The Hermit took the hint and soon had dinner, telling the scout meanwhile how it was that he happened to have the fresh horse, through Blanche having urged it.

The scout ate heartily, then threw himself down for a rest, and just at sunset started to his feet as he heard the words:

"Is Buffalo Bill here, sir?"

"Miss Blanche, you here?" cried the scout, and he looked at the panting, foam-covered horse she had ridden.

"Yes, Buffalo Bill, and I come as a courier, for I have news for you."

In spite of her rapid ride she was very pale, yet perfectly calm.

Then she resumed:

"I do not know why, but in spite of all I will risk my life to go to my father's grave."

"I did so this morning, and fortunately saw some horsemen approaching and went into hiding."

"They halted near me, and I heard one of them give his orders to the other four to go into camp on the range and await his coming."

"He said he was going to Hope Vale Ranch to make a visit and lull suspicion, but would be back in ample time for action."

"Then I saw him distinctly, and I recognized him as he took off his black sombrero and mask—it was the Man in Blue."

"Yes, Miss Blanche, I heard him at midnight last night make all of his plans to hurl his cut-throats upon the valley, while he said that there was one prize in it that was for him alone, one that did not know him as he was, and whom he had sought to win by

pretended deeds of rescue from his own men who were in the plot with him."

"He told the whole story with evident gusto, and let me say to you that when I visited Monument Rock I found there only the trail of two horses, there had been no prisoner, only the Man in Blue calling to you to pretend to save you, and thus, a second time win your gratitude for a rescue."

"The one man with him was the fellow whom he pretended to fire upon, and who was wounded and my prisoner afterward."

"It was the Man in Blue himself who rescued him, and pretended that the outlaws had used his clothes to do so."

"The ranches he has he has murdered the owners of to thus inherit them in his peculiar way, and the mines are stolen property also."

"He is the worst of all men I ever met; and his doom is at hand."

"But did you come here alone to tell me this?"

"I did, and if you were not here to tell the Hermit Avenger."

"The Man in Blue has gone on to the home of Judge Tremain, to be a guest there, the snake in the grass that is to strike at our hearts, and let me tell you, Mr. Cody, that he is the man who murdered my father, the one who confessed to me that he was the one who swore falsely to send my father to the gallows, urged to do so by a woman who demanded it."

"Mr. Cody, I shall return to Hope Vale and all is in your hands, our lives are in your keeping, and we will rest content; but I am revengeful, and I do not wish to know that the Man in Blue dies as a brave man might, by bullet."

"He will be at Hope Vale upon my return and—shall I kill him?"

"Oh, no, or you will give him the very death you do not wish him to have."

"My horse is rested so ride him back, and I have a fresh one your foresight got for me through the Hermit Avenger, and I return with you—yes, and Nemesis Nat will go, too."

"Not now, Bill, I'll follow later," was the reply, and after having supper in camp with them, the fair courier set off with Buffalo Bill for the long and rapid ride to Hope Vale Ranch.

CHAPTER LXV.

RETRIBUTION.

THERE was the greatest anxiety felt for the safety of Blanche Vernon when night came on and she could not be found.

The judge had gone in search of her, with a couple of his men, but returned unsuccessful, and all were waiting the coming of dawn to begin a general search for the missing girl.

The Man in Blue had arrived in the afternoon, and told how he had escaped from the outlaws, and that he could guide the Vigilantes to their retreats, when it was decided to go and attack them.

He seemed deeply distressed at the disappearance of Blanche, and said he would go with the searching party the next morning.

But just before midnight Blanche rode up to the door, and alone.

She simply said that she had taken a different trail, that she was utterly worn out, and with hardly a word to any one, acting as though dazed, she sought her room.

But once there she turned to Mrs. Tremain and Myrtle who accompanied her and said quickly:

"I have not been lost, I am not alone."

"I rode to the Blind Canyon and Buffalo Bill is with me, but in hiding, awaiting to see the judge."

"The Man in Blue is the chief of the outlaw band, and we must dissemble to entrap him, for he is preparing to strike the settlement with his whole force, and it must not be prevented, for there must be no mistake, and Buffalo Bill has arranged for all."

The words of the young girl were heard with amazement, and real consternation; but Mrs. Tremain and Myrtle quickly rallied, the judge was sent for and the story told to him, while Myrtle, with great presence of mind, went out upon the piazza, and told the Man in Blue that Blanche was much better, though very tired, and she hoped would be all right in the morning.

But in the morning Blanche still kept her

room, for she would not face the murderer of her father, as she said:

"I could not resist the temptation to kill him, Myrtle."

After breakfast the Man in Blue took a ride alone, and he went to the Monument Rock to communicate with his men in hiding there, and tell them that all was ready for the strike, that he would be on the scene, as the guest of the judge, and when they arrived would place himself at their head.

He returned for dinner to find that the judge had gone to Silver Thread City, but he was not told that Buffalo Bill had been his companion thither.

It was late when the judge returned, and he did not consider it necessary to tell the Man in Blue that Buffalo Bill and his Vigilantes had come back with him, and were in hiding near by.

Not having been able to see Blanche the Man in Blue returned to his room, when Mrs. Tremain and Myrtle said good-night.

But a moment after he had entered there came a knock at his door, and Buffalo Bill entered.

"Hands up, pard, for I want Captain Black, the outlaw chief, and you are the man."

The scout's revolver covered the outlaw, and through the window were thrust several rifles, as the Volunteer Vigilantes backed up the scout.

"There is some terrible mistake here, Captain Cody; but I submit, of course, as in the morning I will show you how cruel is your charge against me."

The words were calmly uttered, but the scout said:

"You hope to give proof by the appearance of your band, but within two hours more they will ride into a trap there will be no escape from, Circus Sam and his party will be ambushed on the way to Silver Thread, and your third party will be headed off at the lower end of the valley."

"I was at your meeting in Devil's Canyon, Man in Blue, with a heart of red and black, and I know all, and Miss Blanche Vassar listened to your orders to your men at Mountain Rock."

"Now, what proof can you give that you are not flying false colors?"

"None. I make no defense, for I see you have won the game, Buffalo Bill."

"I should have killed you when I discovered that you came to this valley to hunt me down."

"But the traitor has been the old Hermit, Nemesis Nat."

"It is false, for he would not betray you."

"I say that he has, and I wish you to tell him from me that which will crush his old heart—that I am his grandson, the son of his daughter who ran away with the organist of his church."

"Tell him that she told me, her child, of the dishonor upon me, that she reared me to be bad, and, in revenge, because she could not win the love of Carl Vassar, she forced me to swear his life away."

"She is dead now, and I, her son with a clouded name, have drifted from bad to worse, until I am indeed fit only to die on the gallows."

"You have won the game, Buffalo Bill, so do your worst, and tell Nemesis Nat that I avenge myself for his betrayal by breaking his old heart."

Buffalo Bill glanced quickly around him, to see that the judge, Blanche, Allan Tremain and Doctor Donohue alone had heard the words of the outlaw chief.

Then he said, sternly:

"Bring a gag for this man, and remember it must not be taken from his mouth without Mr. Tremain's orders, for that old man's heart shall not be crushed by this fiend's revengeful confession."

The scout's order was obeyed, the man was gagged and led away in the care of two Vigilantes called to guard him to their camp.

Half an hour after, Allan Tremain came in quickly and cried:

"I could not save him—the Vigilantes hanged him, gagged as he was, when they discovered that the Man in Blue was the outlaw chief."

"Then his tongue is silenced forever—it is better so."

"Now we will ride to meet his band," and Buffalo Bill led the way from the house, the others following, among them the judge, who would not remain behind when men were needed at the front.

CHAPTER LXVI.

CONCLUSION.

INTO the traps set for them went the three separate bands of Boys in Black, and the result was short, sharp and deadly work.

When the sun rose over the beautiful Valley of the Silver Thread, the settlers were wild with joy, for the Boys in Black had simply been wiped out, in the terrible excitement and triumph of the hour, men refusing to listen to reason and humanity and hanging up the wounded outlaws.

If any escaped, no one in the settlement knew of the fact.

Buffalo Bill's duty was done, he had accomplished the work upon which he had been sent single-handed by Colonel Royall, and several days after the "massacre of the outlaws," as it was called, he started upon his return to the military post where he was chief of scouts.

But before he went he was glad to feel that old Nemesis Nat, not knowing what his grandson—Belford Fontaine, *alias* Ford Belfont—had confessed, had consented to give up his wild life as an avenger and take charge of the Vassar Ranch as manager, for Blanche would have it so.

It was a year after that Buffalo Bill was again seen in the Silver Thread, but not on the war-trail this time, for he had been called thither to attend a double wedding, as Myrtle Tremain had consented to become Mrs. Dallas Donohue, while Blanche Vassar had discovered that it was Allan Tremain that she had loved, the feeling she had before felt for the Man in Blue being only the fascination of revenge.

THE END.

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